UKRAINE THE DELHI DILEMMA • ODDS ON OIL • TWO FACES OF WAR

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## MODI & THE MONK

BJP'S VICTORY IN UP SETS THE TONE FOR 2024

THE MESSAGE FROM PUNJAB UTTARAKHAND GOA MANIPUR

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# OPEN MAIL

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**LETTER OF THE WEEK**

The ongoing war in Ukraine is getting uglier by the day ('Borderland or Bloodland?', March 14, 2022). It is also a grim reminder that if the war continues, it will have a devastating impact on the global economy. Not only will the countries involved in the conflict be affected but the economy of third world nations will face the repercussions for a long time as well. The war will perpetuate other problems, either directly or by draining precious resources. The rise in energy rates across the world, inflation and increasing food prices, in particular, will hit the poor countries the most. World Bank President David Malpass has warned that the war in Ukraine is "a catastrophe" for the world. However, Russian President Vladimir Putin seems to be undeterred by the strict sanctions issued by the US or other Western countries. It is likely there are more troubling plans in store. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has even warned that World War III could involve nuclear weapons if the West's interference in Ukraine does not stop. Putin seems to be in no mood to pull back Russian troops even as world leaders urge him to stop the shelling and bombing. Thousands of civilians and soldiers are believed to have been killed in the fighting. The continuing indiscriminate bombing by the Russian forces will make Ukrainian cities resemble ghost towns with scores of people fleeing. An equal number of people have been forced to live in bunkers. If the situation escalates, only charred buildings and debris will remain.

**KR Srinivasan**

**POLL BATTLES GO MUSICAL**

Campaign songs that are played out at rallies, online music videos that promote manifestos and songs that drum up support for local candidates have become the mainstay of every election ('Music, Lyrics and Politics', March 14, 2022). Social media platforms and smartphones help amplify these voices. These political songs hold a mirror to the concept of elections as a carnival. Nowadays, such campaign songs even set the tone of elections.

**Palak Sisodiya**

**TEAM SPIRIT**

The Indian women's cricket team has many talented players. Apart from individual brilliance, they perform well collectively ('Call Them the Indian Team' by Boria Majumdar, March 14, 2022). The teammates are aware of their responsibilities. They have done enough to lift women's cricket out of oblivion, and forced people

to take note of it. Each player is a star on her own. The team is led by experienced players who ensure every cricketer performs to her optimum potential.

**Vasudevan**

**VULNERABLE TO SCAMS**

Scams are nothing new for the National Stock Exchange ('Guilty or Gullible?', March 7, 2022). The latest scandal dates back to 2013 but has come to light recently thanks to the close monitoring by Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI). A SEBI order has detailed how Chitra Ramkrishna, the former MD and CEO of the exchange, had appointed an unqualified individual, Anand Subramanian, to a top management role. Apart from Ramkrishna and Subramanian, Ravi Narain and VR Narasimhan were allegedly complicit in the scam. Scams will happen in the future too unless the regulating agencies are alert and act whenever there is any irregularity.

**MY Shariff**

*Read Jayanta Ghosal's Whisperer at* openthemagazine.com

By S PRASANNARAJAN

# TWO FACES OF WAR

THEY ARE THE two faces of this war. They tell us that we haven't come a long way from those battlefields where one man's madness was resisted by the armaments of morality. They show how the power of one—the self-chosen one—taps into fear to control the fundamental decencies of democracy, and how the victim defends freedom from the frontlines. One comes from the dark recesses of history, rearmed by paranoia and imperial memory; the other from the streets that won't give up. One has retired from reality and taken permanent residence in the make-believe of the eternal leader safeguarding the national soul; the other, suddenly denied the very right to exist, becomes a global symbol of fearless patriotism. Together, with their contrasting destinies as defenders of fantasy and reality, they have forced the world to choose between the uses of pragmatism and the obligations of moral power. Some are still wavering.

Vladimir Putin, in his self-portrait, is not the villain the liberal consensus has made him out to be. As someone shaped by the artificially assembled empire of the Soviet Union, and his worldview formed by the enemy-fetish of its dreaded secret service, he has all along been fighting against what he perceives as the mercilessness of history. The collapse of the Soviet Union was a man-made error, not a historical inevitability, and he is the man, the redeemer, who has assigned to himself the mission of restoring the empire from the ruins of a hoary past. The more he gave himself to the mission, the more he realised that constitutionally bound powers of an elected office were not enough.

The cult of the redeemer was incompatible with the pluralism of freedom, and so it was natural for him to withdraw from what he saw as the pretences of democracy and place himself in the autonomous space of the me-alone leader. It was a space of isolation, and what the former secret agent saw from there were unsettling images of enemies crowding outside. The Western strategic apparatus was denying Russia the status it deserves in Europe. And the liberated Ukraine's Eurocentrism was subversion, as Ukraine's liberation itself was a lie. That's why it's not a war for him but a corrective military operation—not just against Ukraine but against a West that has failed to see the depth of Slavic grievance.

Set against him is the face of resistance: a dishevelled president as street fighter, crying for more help, and talking directly to the fellow Slavs in Russia. Volodymyr Zelensky exudes the power of ordinariness, and the emboldening leadership of the citizen-president. He is the amateur for whom politics has become the performative art of truth. Before the war, some even ridiculed him as a comedian who got the script all wrong once in power, and his showmanship a distractive alternative to statecraft. Television may have launched his career and made him a people's star. His cultural genealogy stretches back to the streets of Eastern Europe where the "apolitical politician" spearheaded the liberation movement of 1989. His fight, unlike the professional politician's calculated chess moves, is spontaneous; it is not slowed down by the demands of ideology. Power for him is the pursuit of struggle itself. If Putin's war is powered by political lies, the idea of Ukraine as an extension of Russia being the chief among them, Zelensky's resistance is powered by the fierceness of independence. He carries within him the sighs and sorrows of a people whose sense of independence is older than Russia's imperial history—real or imaginary. Zelensky is the kind of subversive who denies an autocrat like Putin peace of mind. This war is an expression of the autocrat's fear of the free spirit.

Every autocracy, in the end, is about the transference of internalised fear. It feeds on fear to put up a façade of bravado. The so-called populists from stage-managed democracies are the best ones at the job, and the reinvention of the nation on the ruins of cultural decadence is their promise. It's sustained by the recurrence of the enemy, the one that mars the nationalist ideal. Putin plays with suitable history—in which the strongman-redeemer preserves the imperial flame—to keep his grip on a people whom he cannot afford to trust. Zelensky—epitomising the recklessness of freedom—is a contagion. He must go not for the sake of Ukraine alone. A Ukraine minus the subversive spontaneity of a Zelensky is a pre-requisite for Russia's own survival as a power unblemished by democracy. The autocrat knows that the freedom streets of Kyiv stretch all the way to Moscow.

The world, with the dishonourable exception of a few, stands by the citizen-president in this war, which can end only with the liberation of Russia. That will be the spirit of Ukraine. ■

# OPEN DIARY

*Swapan Dasgupta*

THE IMAGE OF the Indian politician being steeped in arrogance and mired in corruption has become part of the national narrative. I guess there can be no smoke without fire and, so, the perception must be partially true. However, the stereotypes falter during elections when politicians seek popular endorsement. No one—unless they have been through an election themselves—can realistically gauge the superhuman effort that has to be put in during an election. It is not merely engaging, charming and motivating people or even deftly managing the party workers. There is the more complicated question of planning strategy at the micro level and checkmating the other side.

The quantum of individual effort, however, doesn't determine a state Assembly or parliamentary election. The constituencies are just too big and varied for personal contact with all the voters. In any case, during an election—where the entire state or the whole country votes—the focus ceases to be the individual MLA or MP. The question most voters ask is: Whose government can best cater to my needs and fulfil my aspirations? To secure an endorsement on the strength of the answer is what really makes for the challenges and the excitement of politics.

The outcome of the five state Assembly elections will, quite naturally, generate a great deal of momentary excitement. BJP, which succeeded in holding on to the four states it was in government, will be understandably elated. Congress, already in crisis because of internal strains that were never addressed after the General Election of 2019, will be despondent over losing its government in Punjab and failing to wrest Uttarakhand and

Goa from BJP. There will, however, be a beatific smile on the faces of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) supporters on the strength of the party's spectacular performance in Punjab. With two states under its belt, AAP can now quite legitimately claim a place at the high table of the anti-BJP opposition.

The consequences of the March 3 verdict will gradually unfold. For the moment, what is consequential is the comprehension of what contributed to the pro-BJP current in different parts of the country. To put the Assembly elections in perspective, these were the first big round of elections after the two-year long experience of the Covid-19 pandemic and its attendant dislocation.

Had the experience of common people been unappetising, it would have been the easiest thing for voters to peremptorily reject the incumbent. If media reports of the horrors of the second wave of the pandemic—grim stories of mass cremations and bodies piling up on roads—are to be believed, most of the BJP candidates, not to mention Prime Minister Narendra Modi and UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath would have been greeted with black flags and hostile audiences during the campaign. BJP candidates would have been fighting to save their deposits. Instead, contrary to the warped perception of how the pandemic was allegedly mishandled, voters in UP, particularly in the poorer areas, have reposed their faith in BJP. Preliminary reports indicate that the popular vote for BJP increased over 2017. If its seats registered a decline, it was due to the consolidation of anti-BJP votes around the Samajwadi Party.

The management of the pandemic is also linked to the success of the distribution of free ration to much of the population for the past two years. This audacious step, reasonably well executed, didn't prevent the distress arising from the largescale closure of SMEs. It however prevented distress from being converted into total deprivation and becoming an instrument of social tension. The Modi government's welfare cushioning appears to have paid electoral returns, in the same way as the construction of toilets and free cooking gas to disadvantaged families did in the 2019 General Election.

The point to note is that while a great deal of attention is showered on the ruthless efficiency of BJP's election machinery, it is instructive to remember that the machine could deliver because the development works of the Modi government surpassed expectations. In short, the groundwork had been done and welfare was merely the icing on the cake. Emotional issues may well be great in motivating and mobilising the committed, but these work in the larger community only when applied in conjunction with other more significant development works. In UP, voters appreciated the Yogi Adityanath government because it could demonstrate performance on many fronts, including a marked improvement in the law and order situation. In short, what won the day for BJP were issues of governance.

To my mind, the UP election was simply a dress rehearsal of the General Election due in 2024. As of now, BJP starts as the favourite. ■

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NOTEBOOK

# The Odds on Oil

IN *LICORICE PIZZA* (2021), a movie that has three Oscar nominations this year, a 15-year-old who can't resist starting a good business, sees an opportunity in water beds. This is the early 1970s US, and the business does well. Suddenly, the Arab countries impose an oil embargo because of the US support to Israel in their war with the Jewish nation, and water beds become unviable because they are made from vinyl, which needs oil. The 1973 embargo was the first time that the Middle East decided to exercise the power of what it held under its deserts, and since then got the geopolitical world playing an intricate game to maintain stability. Over the last century, human civilisation has been completely intertwined with oil. Without it there would be chaos and nations would collapse. It is why when Iraq invaded Kuwait, the US, situated at the other end of the planet, sent in an army to repel the former. That delicate political balance from which the US' enormous energy needs were being met was threatened. It just wouldn't do to have one man, Saddam Hussein, have control over so much oil.

Oil has always had a role in human history, but it was only in modern times and with the discovery of enormous wells under deserts that industrial-scale extraction became possible. That in turn led to an incredible array of materials we have all around us. What is plastic made from after all? Even if you are an environmentalist who has an aversion to it, there is really no way to be plastic-free. Textiles, medical equipment, toys, sport goods, spacecraft, cosmetics, chewing gum—the hidden presence of oil is everywhere. There is then its main identity, as fuel. All transport, even spacecraft, needs oil and its derivatives.

The Middle East looms large in the world of oil, but the US has surpassed it as the largest producer. This it has achieved through working on a long-term objective of being energy-independent. After the US, the big two producers are Saudi Arabia and Russia. A few years ago, the two countries went on a price-cutting war and Indian lorry owners here began to breathe easy because petrol prices fell. The Indian government became flush with money because it was buying cheap on the international market and selling it high through a tax to the public. Because the cost of transporting goods came down, inflation remained under control. For most people, lower oil and gas prices are something to cheer. At present, it is the opposite.

Crude oil price per barrel was around $90 two weeks ago when Russia moved against Ukraine. It is now over $120, the latest explosion propelled by a US ban on Russian oil. Even though they can still sell as an exception to Europe, the markets know that the future is touch and go. Nations cannot be at economic war and continue to trade even if it is crucial to both parties. The *New York Times* reported: "Oil prices were already rising fast as the world economy emerged from Covid-19 shutdowns and producers stretched to meet growing demand. International oil companies had cut back investment over the last two years. Now traders are bidding up crude prices to levels not seen in years, expecting that Russia — one of the top three oil producers, along with the United States and Saudi Arabia — will be sidelined. With the announcement of the American embargo on Tuesday, prices will probably climb higher, energy analysts say." There is just no way to make up for the shortfall of

**India is almost entirely reliant on oil imports for its needs and oil shocks reverberate harder. No sooner did prices shoot up than the stock markets tanked and investments were being pulled away. The global brokerage house Credit Suisse downgraded Indian equities to 'underweight', which meant they saw a serious impact on Indian companies**

Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

Russian oil anytime soon. *The Economist* wrote: "Russia, with its 4.5m bpd of crude exports and additional 2.5m bpd of oil-product exports, is the world's second-biggest exporter of petroleum. If all those exports were cut off, as the result of an American-led energy embargo or through Vladimir Putin using export curbs as an economic weapon, the world economy would be dealt a severe blow...no other supplier, nor any combination of them could produce sufficient incremental volumes of oil quickly enough to replace the loss of all Russian exports."

The US imports very little from Russia and can weather the storm. But European countries arrayed against Russia are heavily dependent on it. This is why the Russians, too, threatened to pull the plug on the supply despite their desperate need to prop up a collapsing economy. Its Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said that prices could rise as much as $300 per barrel because of the actions taken against them. Reuters reported: "Novak said Russia, which supplies 40% of Europe's gas, was fulfilling its obligations in full but that it would be entirely within its rights to retaliate against the European Union after Germany last month froze the certification of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. "In connection with...the imposition of a ban on Nord Stream 2, we have every right to take a matching decision and impose an embargo on gas pumping through the Nord Stream 1 gas pipeline," Novak said."

India is almost entirely reliant on oil imports for its needs and oil shocks reverberate harder. No sooner did prices shoot up than the stock markets tanked and investments were being pulled away. The global brokerage house Credit Suisse downgraded Indian equities to "underweight", which meant they saw a serious impact on Indian companies. A note from Credit Suisse, as quoted in *Business Standard*, said: "...today we tactically cut our India position from overweight to underweight. Higher oil prices hurt the current account, add to inflationary pressures and increase sensitivity to Fed rate hikes." The newspaper's report added: "Brent crude of $120 a barrel, Credit Suisse estimates, could add $60 billion to India's import bill. Price rises for gas, coal, edible oils, and fertilisers could add another $35 billion. Inflation, as a result, could be higher by 100 basis points (bps)." The Russians will happily sell at a discount to India but then that would mean antagonising the US and Europe, a choice that will keep the government awake for many nights.

Covid had already damaged the Indian economy and long-term high oil prices would mean further delay in the resumption of growth. That, in turn, means fewer jobs. Combined with inflation, it could be a factor in the coming elections. For instance, oil is also needed for fertilisers and pesticides and if their prices increase, then the farmers feel the pinch and will be looking for someone to blame. From the government's point of view, the only silver lining is that the present price rise came just when elections to the five states got over. Otherwise, the political will to increase fuel prices is hard to come by when people are deciding whom to vote for. After the results are out, don't be surprised to fork out a lot more at the petrol station. ■

**By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI**

PORTRAIT • MAUS

# A NICER HOLOCAUST?

## The ban on Art Spiegelman's book is a case of conservative ignorance meeting woke cancel culture

ON MARCH 1, the defiant president of a besieged country tweeted: "To the world: what is the point of saying ‹‹never again›› for 80 years, if the world stays silent when a bomb drops on the same site of Babyn Yar? At least 5 killed. History repeating..." A little more than a month before that, the board of education of McMinn County in Tennessee had voted to ban Art Spiegelman's *Maus* from school curricula. Spiegelman's semi-autobiographical graphic novel of the Holocaust, first serialised as a comic in his *Raw* in 1980, was published in two instalments in 1986 and 1991. In 1992, *Maus* received a special Pulitzer, the first for a graphic novel.

The full title of the work is *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. Spiegelman's parents, called Vladek and Anja in the book, were Polish Jews and survivors of Auschwitz-Birkenau. His mother committed suicide in 1968. The novel is also a father-son story, illustrating Art's difficult relationship with his father, while the Holocaust becomes the son's unlived formative experience and inheritance. Jews are the mice, Germans the cats. And Poles are the pigs. The survivors' tale is a shared and individual trauma whose consequences are both world-defining and customised for the son. *Maus* was an overwhelming artistic and critical success, a masterpiece demonstrating how the most horrific story of the 20th century could be told using an unusual form for the content. It had been course material, an 'anchor text', on the Holocaust for eighth graders at the time it was banned by the McMinn County education board.

The board, three decades after the full work was published, pounced on "cuss words" (for example, 'bitch' and 'god damn') and "nudity" (animal nudity to be precise) to question what *Maus* and Spiegelman were teaching students. As one board member put it: "We don't need to enable or somewhat promote this stuff. It shows people hanging. It shows them killing kids. Why does the educational system promote this kind of stuff? It is not wise or healthy." Educators did their best at the meeting, as David Corn reported in *Mother Jones*, to educate the board members—about the historicity of the Holocaust, that it was a nasty affair, that children were murdered, that about six million were killed...But the board got its way, and the headlines. Of course, as another board member said, "I have not seen the book and read the whole book. I read the reviews."

GETTY IMAGES

Spiegelman told the *New York Times* that the board was basically asking, "Why can't they teach a nicer Holocaust?"

The debate over history and its depictions in historiography, literature, art and architecture that has divided the US since long before the statues were brought down and institutions began removing Washington, Jefferson and even Woodrow Wilson from their names and 'cancel culture' became the norm on the university campus—largely as a push from the liberals and the left—has seen a conservative reaction that, at its best, wants history to be distinguished between ideals and deviations from the same, and, at its worst, cannot countenance revision. It meets the woke attempt at rewriting history from today's perspective in that both extremes refuse to face the reality of the past. In the case of the Tennessee county education board, to protect children from the world, they would rather not tell 13-year-old kids what the world is really like.

Spiegelman himself said a few years ago: "The Holocaust trumps art every time." He was born Itzhak Avraham ben Zeev in Stockholm in 1948. Spiegelman, the family name, literally translates as "mirror man". As far as holding up a mirror to society goes, Arthur, or Art as he became, comes from the opposite end of the spectrum on free speech—he had defended the right of Nazis to march in Skokie in Illinois, then known for its sizeable population of Holocaust survivors. "I just thought that seemed right. Let them march, and if there's any more trouble, stop them. I thought that was a conversation that had to take place...It shaped me," Spiegelman said recently. The censorship of the McCarthy era, especially the burning of comic books under the Comics Code, was an eye-opener for him and other graphic artists/cartoonists of his generation.

For now, the Tennessee ban has pushed sales of *Maus* to record levels (book bans are meaningless anyway in the land of the First Amendment), so much so that the publisher has asked the Internet Archives to remove the free copy from its digital library. Now that's an axiom of publishing education board members never learn (just as they don't read). Spiegelman might turn out prophetic for telling the *Guardian*: "I see a future where it [the book galley] says, 'Published April 3, banned May 12,'...That would be the end date of anything they need to do to publicize the book." ■

**By SUDEEP PAUL**

ANGLE

# THE UNEXPECTED HAPPY ENDING

## What the career of the new Mumbai police commissioner says about the Indian system

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

THERE IS A statement about the Indian condition in the appointment of the new police commissioner of Mumbai, but it is difficult to pinpoint what exactly it is. Should it be a sign that the establishment, despite all its decrepitation and corruption, has a corrective and does not slide below a threshold? Or that justice happens to people with integrity as long as they don't fold? Or is it that good things usually don't happen to people with integrity unless a rare set of circumstances come together?

Sanjay Pandey chose the Indian Police Service even though as a computer engineer from the Indian Institute of Technology right at the cusp of the IT revolution in the country, he would easily have made a lucrative career that would, as per norm, probably take him abroad. He chose to be a policeman and was soon always in the public eye in the 1990s for exemplary work. He maintained peace without bias in Dharavi during the Mumbai communal riots, but that didn't go well with Shiv Sena. More high-profile cases made other political parties wary of him. And then it was nothing but punishment postings. He tried to leave the service and join the private sector but the government wouldn't let him. Intermittently, there would be reports of him being harassed, as when he was kept waiting for three years without a posting. Despite being the senior-most, he was passed over for the commissioner's job a couple of years ago, and he made his agitation public. And this, one would think, would be a career that would end as a footnote, except that then the tide turned without him having to lift a finger.

There was the massive embarrassment for the Maharashtra government when a rogue encounter specialist was arrested for murder. He named the former police commissioner as a party to corruption. The police commissioner in turn named the state's home minister. The government needed someone clean to salvage anything out of the murk. Pandey was first named director general of police (DGP), and then unconventionally appointed Mumbai's police commissioner, one of the most aspired for postings in the IPS. It might have something to do with the imminent municipal elections where the perception of Mumbai Police being sorted out could help. Whatever it is, this is a story that has a happy ending. Except for one addendum.

His tenure will be only four months. An independent policeman, even a maverick perhaps, in charge of the city for long is too much of risk. A short tenure is just about enough to keep all parties satisfied. Perhaps the only thing that Pandey's career trajectory tells us is the role of luck. Without the damage that preceded him, there would be no recognition or reward. But should a decent society bank on the bad deeds of others to give good men their due? ■

IDEAS

## PROHIBITION

The Supreme Court had some harsh words for the Bihar government for its prohibition policy because the state's courts were getting bogged in dealing with just this one law's fallout. It said the government should had done an assessment of the impact before passing it and warned that they would give bail to everyone if the government didn't come up with a solution. Prohibition doesn't usually work, and especially in a state where law and order is inefficient, all it does is create an underworld. Meanwhile, the system itself becomes overburdened in doing the impossible. The burdening of courts is one instance of it. Between populism and bad governance, the government chose the former, and so now has to deal with the latter. ■

WORD'S WORTH

**'There'd never been a more advantageous time to be a criminal in America than during the 13 years of Prohibition. At a stroke, the American government closed down the fifth largest industry in the United States—alcohol production—and just handed it to criminals—a pretty remarkable thing to do'**

BILL BRYSON WRITER

# The Divinity of Nageshvara

## The boon that protected the dharma of the forest

THE *JYOTIRLINGAM* OF Nageshvara is in Darukavana and it is not easy to identify where it is located geographically. Darukavana is usually understood to be a forest of *devadaru* trees. But in this story from Shiva Purana, the name owes its origin to a demon named Daruka.

Suta said, "There was a *rakshasa* named Darukaa, insolent because of a boon obtained from Parvati. Her husband, Daruka, was supreme in strength. Along with many other *rakshasas*, he created carnage among the virtuous. He destroyed sacrifices and dharma in the worlds. Along the shores of the western ocean, there was a forest that was prosperous in every possible way. In every direction, it extended for sixteen *yojanas*. Whenever Darukaa went to the forest for her own pleasures, the ground there was covered with trees and every other kind of accompaniment. Devi gave Darukaa that forest to look after it. They remained there and caused fear to all the others who were there. Because of Daruka *rakshasa* and his wife, Darukaa, all the people suffered. They went and sought refuge with the sage Ourva. The people said, "O *maharshi*! Please grant us refuge. Otherwise, the wicked ones will kill us. Other than you, there is no one else on earth who can offer us refuge. On seeing you, all the *rakshasas* run a long distance away. Shiva's blazing energy always radiates in you." Ourva replied, "The *rakshasas* may be supremely strong. But if they cause violence to other beings on earth, they will lose their own lives. When sacrifices are destroyed, all the *rakshasas* will lose their lives." The devas got to know about the reason behind the curse. Therefore, they made efforts to fight against the enemies of the devas."

"Seeing this, the *rakshasas* resorted to consultations. The *rakshasas* said, "What should be done? Where will we go? We are fighting and are being killed. They are fighting and are not being killed." Unable to think of a means, they were constantly miserable. *Rakshasi* Darukaa also got to know that a calamity had presented itself. Therefore, she spoke about the boon granted by Bhavani. Darukaa said, "When I worshipped her earlier, Bhava's wife bestowed a boon on me. If you so wish, you can come to the forest with me. I obtained a boon from her. Let the *rakshasas* be taken to the forest that is in the water [clearly, there was an island] and remain there happily." Hearing the *rakshasa*'s words, the *rakshasas* were filled with joy. They lost their fear and spoke to each other. "She is blessed. Our queen has been successful in saving our lives." There were people who had suffered many miseries on account of the *rakshasas* earlier. Meanwhile, they arrived there, to fight alongside the devas."

"The *rakshasas* took everything to the city that was land in the middle of water. The *rakshasa* praised Devi and uttered words of "victory". Without any fear, all of them remained there, in the middle of the ocean. They remained inside the city in the water and amused themselves. The *rakshasas* never came to earth. Scared of the sage's curse, they remained in the water. They seized people travelling in boats and took them to the city. They hurled some of them into prisons in the city and killed some of them. Because of the boon granted by Bhavani, the *rakshasas* were fearless. Remaining there, they started to cause sufferings again, wherever they could. Earlier, people constantly faced fear on land. Now, they constantly faced fear in the water. Sometimes, the *rakshasa* emerged from the city in the water. She obstructed the path. Standing there, she made people on land suffer. Meanwhile, many beautiful boats arrived there and all of them were full of people. Seeing these boats, the *rakshasas* were delighted. Those crooked ones quickly rushed there and seized them. Those immensely strong ones brought them to the city. They hurled the people into prisons and bound them up in strong fetters."

"Among them, there was a Vaishya named Supriya. He was auspicious in conduct and always devoted to Shiva. He was loved by Shiva. He never remained without worshipping Shiva. He followed Shiva's dharma in every possible way, wearing *bhasma* and *rudraksha* as ornaments. When he could not perform the worship, he did not eat. There too, the Vaishya engaged in worshipping Shiva. In that prison, he taught many people how to worship Shiva using a *parthiva lingam*. According to their own desires, all of them worshipped Shiva. They used many modes, depending on what they had seen and what they had

heard. While they were there, some of them sat in excellent *asanas* and immersed themselves in *dhyana*. Some of them delightedly worshipped Shiva in their minds. Their leader created a *parthiva lingam*, followed the norms and directly worshipped Shiva. There were others who did not know about the methods. They remembered the supreme mantra '*Namo Shivaya*' and immersed themselves in meditating on Shankara. In this way, as the Vaishya worshipped Shiva, six months passed without any impediments."

"On one occasion, one of the evil-souled *rakshasa*'s attendants saw Shankara's beautiful form in front of him. He went and informed the king of *rakshasas*. The king of *rakshasas*, Daruka, quickly arrived there. Though he was strong, he was agitated and asked about Shiva. Daruka asked, "O Vaishya! Who are you meditating on?" He replied, "I do not know." Hearing this, the *rakshasa* became angry and sent *rakshasas*, asking them to kill him. Instructed by him, they swiftly went there to kill him, with many types of weapons. Seeing them arrive, Supriya was scared, but his mind was fixed on Shankara. He cheerfully remembered Shiva and repeatedly chanted his names. When he prayed in this way, Shambhu emerged from a cavity. In the midst of this, Shiva's form was that of a mass of radiance. He was with his attendants. On seeing him, Supriya worshipped him. Worshipped in this way, Shambhu was pleased. He gave him the weapon named Pashupata. He himself killed the bulls among the *rakshasas* and all their followers and destroyed their equipment. It was wonderful. Shankara protected his devotee and killed the wicked. Having killed all of them, he bestowed a boon on the forest. "In this forest, the dharma of the *varnas*, Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras will always be observed. The best among sages will be here, never with *tamas* qualities. They will propound Shiva's dharma and practice Shiva's dharma." At this time, the *rakshasa* known as Darukaa, who was distressed in her mind, praised Devi Parvati. Pleased, Devi asked, "What will I do?" She replied, "Please save my lineage again." Parvati said, "I will protect your lineage." Saying this, she quarreled with Shiva. Shiva saw that Devi was angry. However, the lord was bound by the boon he had conferred. Therefore, he cheerfully said, "Do what you wish to." Parvati was extremely happy to hear the words spoken by her husband, Shankara. Parvati said, "Your words will come true when it is the end of the *yuga*. Until then, it is my view that Creation should possess the qualities of *tamas*. You should prove that the words spoken by me will come true. This *rakshasa* Darukaa is actually a *devi*, and is my Shakti. She is strongest among all the *rakshasis*. Let her rule over a kingdom of *rakshasas*. These wives of the *rakshasas* will give birth to sons." Shankara said, "O beloved! If you say so, please listen to my words. To protect devotees, I will happily remain in this forest. Whoever is seen to cheerfully establish the dharma of the *varnas* here, will become the emperor. Otherwise, when *kali yuga* is over and a new *satya yuga* starts, there will be a lord of men famous under the name of Virasena, Mahasena's son. He will be extremely valiant. He will be my devotee and will be able to see me. When he sees me, he will become an emperor." In this way, the couple laughed and spoke to each other. They themselves remained in that place and brought greatness to it. In the form of the *jyotirlingam*, Shiva came to be named Nageshvara. Devi Shivaa became Nageshvari. Both are loved by virtuous people."

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

IN THIS FOREST, THE DHARMA OF THE VARNAS, BRAHMANAS, KSHATRIYAS, VAISHYAS AND SHUDRAS WILL ALWAYS BE OBSERVED. THE BEST AMONG SAGES WILL BE HERE, NEVER WITH *TAMAS* QUALITIES. THEY WILL PROPOUND SHIVA'S DHARMA AND PRACTICE SHIVA'S DHARMA

"In the beautiful region of Nishadha, Virasena was born in a Kshatriya lineage. [When Shiva spoke to Parvati, this was in the future tense. By the time Suta spoke to the sages, the incident belonged to the past tense.] He was the son of Mahasena and was loved by Shiva. With a *parthiva lingam*, he worshipped Isha. Virasena performed extremely difficult austerities for twelve years. Shankara manifested himself and spoke. "Make a wooden boat that is in the shape of a fish and smear it with tin. I will create Yogamaya and give her to you. Accept her. With her and your men, enter the boat. Use that to go and enter the cavity I created. Enter the place and worship Nageshvara. You will obtain Pashupata there. Use that to slay the *rakshasa* and others." In this way, Shiva conferred a boon and Virasena became capable of doing everything. In this way, the divinity originated as Nageshvara, the lord of all the *jyotirlingams*. In the form of the *jyotirlingam*, he satisfies all the desires in the three worlds." ■

# The Imperfect Perfectionist

## Shane Warne sometimes did not realise how good he was

IT WAS 1992 and India were in Australia for what was a really depressing series in the end. The Indians under Mohammad Azharuddin had lost the series 0-4 and stood no chance against the likes of Craig McDermott, Merv Hughes, Bruce Reid and the like. Except in Sydney and Adelaide, the series turned out to be a no-contest and in a sense resulted in ending promising careers. Amidst all the doom and gloom, Sydney was a highlight with Ravi Shastri scoring a double hundred and 19-year-old Sachin Tendulkar scoring an unbeaten 148-not-out. And each of them made merry when a young man with shiny golden hair came on to bowl leg spin. The Indians looked upon his spells as a 'release' from the pressure and attacked him all through, spoiling his debut. Shane Warne on debut had conceded 150 runs. Had it been someone else, he would have taken months to come back from this rather uneventful debut. Some wouldn't even make a comeback. Not Warne. Building on his fitness and skill, Shane Warne within years had transformed himself into Australia's biggest match-winner of all time.

Walking the first couple of steps before trudging on to the wicket and giving the ball a rip, it was classic Warne. And with him around, anything could happen. The ball for years was transformed into a canvas in the hands of the artist. Each time he flicked his wrist, we would see colours of a different hue. Mike Gatting witnessed it first hand in what we now know and recognise as the Ball of the Century. The ball, under the impact of the many revolutions Warne had imparted to it, had little option but to land on leg stump and then change direction 60 degrees and crash into Gatting's off stump. The batsman, like everyone else around, was stunned. While the Australians regained composure and the emotions turned from bewilderment to ecstasy within seconds, for Gatting it was a sense of disbelief. No skill could have combated that ball and all Gatting or anyone else could do was succumb to the genius of Warne. It was at one level a sense of helplessness. What could one do if someone is as good?

That's the real Shane Warne story. He was just too good. Maybe even he did not realise on occasions how good he was and that's why let things drift. For, on the cricket pitch everything was controllable with Warne around. With ball in hand he could weave a kind of magic that no one else could even think of and as a result he just felt supreme in every situation. Australia under the pump, and all Steve Waugh or Ricky Ponting would have to do was throw the ball to Warne. He would deal with the situation and pull a rabbit out of the hat. When you are as good, it gives you a sense of infallibility. If I could control the number of revolutions on the cricket ball and control each degree of its movement, I could control life in equal measure. With money and means, there is nothing that I can't control is the sense that one gets. The problem is, you can't control health. No amount of money and no amount of talent can help control the effects of indiscipline on one's body. That's what happened to Warne and that's what he couldn't control. In sum, he tried to control the uncontrollable and, as with all things nature, you never win against the powers of nature.

IT WAS NOT SIMPLY THE SPIN THAT WARNE IMPARTED TO THE BALL. THERE HAVE BEEN BIGGER SPINNERS OF THE CRICKET BALL AND STUART MCGILL IS A PRIME EXAMPLE. MCGILL COULD TURN THE BALL MORE AND YET COULD NEVER MATCH WARNE'S GENIUS. WHILE IT IS ONE THING TO BE ABLE TO SPIN THE BALL, WHAT IS MORE IMPORTANT IS TO BE ABLE TO CONTROL THE SPIN IN A WAY THAT YOU GET YOUR PREY

While I can't claim Warne was a friend, I can certainly say we were fairly well acquainted. I had the pleasure of interviewing him on occasions and each time the thing that struck me was

GETTY IMAGES

SHANE WARNE
**(1969-2022)**

his opinionated and candid nature. When you interview a star, you are always in search of a headline. You want them to say things that have news value and things that would get people hooked to the interview. An interview for the sake of an interview would never have much appeal. With Warne, you always got value for your time. He would make sharp, incisive and provocative comments and inevitably polarise opinion. At least, he would make people think. Make them sit up and take notice. A genius, his thoughts would be tailored towards things that not many could think of or fathom. It would take a Warne to point you in that direction. That's what I had observed each time we did an interview. In fact, it wouldn't be wrong to say that Warne often took control of the conversation. In normal circumstances, one would be adequately prepared for an interview and control the flow. That's how most interviews are done. With Warne, things were different. He would inevitably turn up with an out-of-the-box answer and change the course of the conversation. Like on the pitch, he loved control and more often than not ended up on the winning side.

It is this which I will miss about Warne. In every sense, he enriched the game we all love. And did so with tonnes of hard work. While people talk about his success, what we don't mention is the amount of work he had put into his bowling. Each time I read parts of his autobiography, this is the one thing that stands out. He had never left things to chance and never had taken the shortcut. Meshed with all the talent that he possessed, he worked the hardest to hone the talent and give it a kind of finesse none could think of attaining. It was not simply the spin that he imparted to the ball. There have been bigger spinners of the cricket ball than Warne and Stuart McGill is a prime example. McGill could turn the ball more than Warne on occasions and yet could never match the genius of Warne. While it is one thing to be able to spin the ball, what is more important is to be able to control the spin in a way that you pick up your prey. While Glenn McGrath moved the ball far less than some of his contemporaries, what he did was pick up the edge far more regularly than others. That's why he has 563 wickets while many others have ended their careers with 200. Warne knew the art of perfection and with the ball he was as close as one could possibly get to perfection. A fascinating man, he enriched world cricket for three decades before leaving us all poorer because in life he moved away from the very art of perfection that he stood for. For cricket's 007 equivalent, all we can say is it is "No time to Die." ■

# A View from the Elite Ghettos

## The loneliness of the Indian foreign correspondent

THE JOB OF the Indian foreign correspondent is a lonely one. Over the last two decades I have reported from Beijing, Brussels, Jakarta and Tokyo. In the latter three cities, I was the only Indian journalist in town. In China, I was one among three.

The reason for this solitary state of affairs is complex. Travel, research and reportage in foreign lands need the kind of financial commitment that Indian media organisations either lack or lack the appetite for. Even as the Indian state struts and frets its hour upon the global stage full of sound and fury, most Indians remain deeply parochial. Foreign news in India must contend with outsized competition from Bollywood, cricket, and domestic electoral machinations.

All of which goes some way in explaining why the wide-eyed questions I get from my compatriots about other countries leave me with the impression that they believe themselves to be nationals of the *New York Times*, rather than India. Their implicit norm, when it comes to analysing the foreign, is bewilderingly disconnected from their Indian quotidian. Let me explain with a few examples.

On visits back to Delhi during the years I was reporting from China in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, I was confounded by the schadenfreude I encountered regarding air pollution. At social gatherings, it was common for random acquaintances to delightedly commiserate with me about having to put up with the Chinese capital's terrible air.

"It's so bad there, no? People even have to wear masks outside! Tch! Tch!"

"Oh, the poor kids! Imagine having air purifiers in the classroom. So sad."

Once my older son was born, I was even asked if I'd consider moving back home out of concern for my baby's health. "Because Delhi's air is so salubrious?" I wanted to reply, but I was aware that this would be sarcasm off a duck's back. It was as though my interlocutors didn't breathe or just look outside their windows.

They must have, but the *New York Times* had not cottoned on to India's air pollution problem yet, while Beijing had become the international poster boy for bad air. Consequently, this was how the Indians I spoke to perceived the world to be. China was associated with the environmental degradation that the Western media framed their stories about it around, while India's own air catastrophe had to wait for external acknowledgement before it could become visible.

Then came my four-year stint in Tokyo from 2016 on. Japan generates considerable interest in elite Indian circles because of the country's cultural appeal as a travel destination. Society ladies are in rapture at the thought of sakura in bloom and Japanese whisky has acquired cult status. But one question I was repeatedly asked was about the lowly status of women in Japanese society, accompanied by tut-tutting reminiscent of comments about Beijing's air a decade earlier.

My interlocutors, you see, were all up-to-date with the World Economic Forum's annual Global Gender Gap Report, in which Japan regularly places below other advanced economies. Hence, the seeming absurdity of Indians feeling bad for Japanese women.

Yes, India had had a woman prime minister. Yes, some of India's top executives and entrepreneurs were women. But the fact is, unlike in most Indian cities, women in Japan could usually go out for a walk.

In Japan, women inhabited public spaces with confidence. They dressed as they liked. They drank what they liked. They tended to be more sexually liberated than the global norm. Even the idea that Japanese women stayed at home, unwelcome by the workforce, needed to be tempered. In fact, over 76 per cent of Japan's adult women work outside the home (albeit often in part-time or lower paid jobs). The equivalent figure for India is an abysmal 20 per cent and declining.

INDIANS LEARN LITTLE ABOUT FOREIGN COUNTRIES AND WHATEVER SLIPS INTO THEIR CONSCIOUSNESS IS MAINLY THROUGH THE WORK OF WESTERN JOURNALISTS. THEY DEVELOP LITTLE TRUE INTEREST IN THE WORLD BEYOND. THAT LACK OF INTEREST IS THEN USED BY INDIAN MEDIA EDITORS TO GIVE SHORT SHRIFT TO INTERNATIONAL COVERAGE

Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

How does one make sense of this phenomenon? To begin with, many of these reactions are characteristic of the rarefied demographic that already lives in a nation-within-a-nation, cocooned from the larger geographical entity they inhabit by class, caste and access to the *New York Times*.

It's ironic that in cities like New York and London, Indian immigrants cluster to form Little Indias, while in India itself, elite Indians clump to create Little New Yorks/Londons. These latter ghettos aren't populated by immigrants but by locals who act like expats. People whose worldviews and sense of norms suffer from spatiotemporal dysmorphia. Their physical bodies are in India, but they understand the wider world from the vantage point of the English-speaking capitals of the West.

But another reason beyond the reality distorting lenses of privilege is the egregious lack of Indian foreign correspondents. And so, we return to the beginning of this column. An Indian and a 'Westerner' in a third country often interpret the same facts in completely different ways.

The traffic in Beijing for someone from Delhi, for example, comes across as remarkably orderly. For someone from Germany, on the other hand, it is remarkably chaotic. Same 'fact', but polar opposite observations. Clearly, for Indians to learn about the world through Western lenses is to get a cockeyed, partial sense of it.

Moreover, foreign correspondents don't just inform their audience about other parts of the world, but in doing so they also hold up a mirror to their home nations, as provocations for thought and action.

Just as travel abroad has the counterintuitive effect of helping travellers wake up to themselves—of seeing themselves more clearly because of the comparative framework they now have—so the work of a foreign correspondent assists at a more general, nationwide level, to help a country both understand itself better, as well as its place within the wider context.

But in India, it's a Catch-22 situation. Indians learn little about foreign countries and whatever slips into their consciousness is mainly through the work of Western journalists. Understandably, they develop little true interest in the world beyond. But that lack of interest is then used as justification by Indian media editors to give short shrift to international coverage, which in its turn feeds that indifference, closing the unfortunate loop.

A current example of the consequences of this lacuna is the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine. For India, it throws up a range of strategic and ideological dilemmas that require serious thinking through. What kind of an actor does India want to be on the global stage? What does India's reaction to the war say about its sense of self? What water does its vaunted principle of national sovereignty and non-interference in the sovereign affairs of other countries hold in the face of the unwillingness to condemn a blatant violation of that principle?

There is more than one possible answer to these questions. But the lack of a broad public discourse on them is glaring. Until the actual tanks started rolling into Ukraine, the Indian media was fixated on whether girls in hijabs could attend school. In the meantime, events were fundamentally reshaping the global strategic landscape and India's place in it.

The loneliness of the Indian foreign correspondent has real consequences. Should it persist, Indians will remain a nation of underprepared and uninformed navel gazers, with a warped lens on the world. ■

By MICHAEL KUGELMAN

# THE DELHI DILEMMA

*Putin's war presents South Asia, especially India, with difficult choices*

ONE CAN BE forgiven for still not accepting the fact that Russia has invaded Ukraine. The mobilisation of nearly 200,000 troops along the border should have been a bluff, or at the most a precursor to a more limited incursion. Leaked US intelligence reports warning of full-scale war should have been exaggerations. Weren't full-scale, cross-border land invasions meant to be a relic of the past?

Vladimir Putin wouldn't dare deploy Russian troops across Europe's second-largest country, would he?

But he did. The horrors of this war are plain to see, and further amplified by the power of social media, which have brought unrelenting images of destruction and displacement. The immediate global impacts, especially skyrocketing oil prices, are being felt, too.

Wars are famously unpredictable. We don't know how long this conflict will last, or how it will end. The only person who knows may be Putin himself. But even at this early juncture, it's clear the war has caused seismic shifts for international relations. And it presents South Asia with difficult choices.

Putin's invasion offers a jolting reminder that traditional security threats have not gone away. All that talk of new and emerging security challenges, such as climate change, pandemics, and cyber war? All that emphasis on today's conflicts mainly being waged by proxies and other non-state actors? All that focus on the need for more agile and modern military forces to counter these new threats? Putin has put that talk on ice by launching a traditional conflict, using traditional tactics and traditional equipment. To be sure, it features modern elements, like information warfare. Still, one of the most striking manifestations of the war effort so far has been eerie satellite imagery of a 40-mile-long Russian tank convey slowly making its way across Ukraine. It's a scene associated with so many wars of the past.

Another notable fallout of this war is the limits of US power, and that of the West on the whole. The NATO alliance couldn't deter Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and it couldn't deter this much larger invasion. Washington tried its best, from threatening sanctions and offering diplomacy to leaking intelligence meant to expose Russian false flags. Nothing worked.

Beijing and nervous citizens of Taiwan have taken note. So has Pyongyang, which tested missiles soon after the launch of the invasion.

The good news for the West is that Russia has reenergised and reunited a NATO alliance that floundered during the Donald Trump era. Putin has helped Joe Biden achieve one of his core foreign policy goals—the restoration of alliances. Washington and its NATO allies are on the same page in their views of Russia's invasion. Also, EU countries, which rely heavily on Russian energy, are rapidly developing new policies to reduce their reliance on Russian gas, in order to ease their concerns about any sanctions on the Russian energy sector—one of the only aspects of this crisis where Washington doesn't see eye-to-eye with its European partners.

Still, NATO has difficult decisions to make. Unless Russia expands its war into NATO territory, the alliance wisely won't put boots on the ground. This leaves limited military options to assist Ukraine. The most impactful option, a no-fly zone, is unlikely because it could drag NATO into the war. A more feasible step may be providing training to Ukrainian troops on NATO soil. For now, the plan is to funnel arms and other military assistance to Ukrainian forces. But this may not be enough. For now, Ukraine is bravely resisting

Ukrainian soldiers take cover from Russian shelling in Bucha, west of Kyiv, March 4

AFP

WHILE NATO HAS DIFFICULT CHOICES TO MAKE IN THE MILITARY/SECURITY REALM, SOUTH ASIAN CAPITALS ARE PRESENTED WITH SOME TOUGH DIPLOMATIC AND ECONOMIC CHOICES. INDIA HAS DECLINED TO CRITICISE ITS RUSSIAN FRIEND FOR ITS AGGRESSIVE ACTS. THIS POSITION IS INCREASINGLY UNTENABLE BECAUSE THE INVASION OF UKRAINE IS ESPECIALLY EGREGIOUS, AND BECAUSE NEW DELHI'S STRONG SECURITY RELATIONSHIP WITH WASHINGTON MEANS INDIA WILL BE UNDER UNPRECEDENTED PRESSURE TO CHANGE ITS STANCE

Russian offensives, but much more Russian firepower could be in the offing. The numbers aren't in Ukraine's favour. The Russian military is much larger, and Moscow's defence spending in recent years has been more than 12 times that of Ukraine's.

For countries further removed from the war, such as those in South Asia, there are different kinds of difficult choices to make. Russia has no enemies in South Asia—and quite a few friends. The Soviet debacle in Afghanistan continues to haunt Russia today, but in recent years Moscow has cultivated cordial ties with key political actors there, including the Taliban. Its relationship with India continues to be a combination of nostalgia-driven bonhomie and cold-hard-interests-based defence cooperation. In recent years, impelled by shared goals in Afghanistan and a keen interest in Pakistan's gas industry, Moscow has quietly scaled up ties with Islamabad. In other South Asian states, Russia has made trade and investment inroads. It's a top destination for Sri Lankan tea exports, it has invested in nuclear power in Bangladesh, and it has explored cooperation with Nepal's energy industry.

In the West, where relations with Moscow range from awkward to hostile, there's no question about whether or not to take a hard line towards Moscow, post-invasion. But in South Asia, it's more complicated. The region has been divided about how to react—quite literally. Half the SAARC states abstained from a UN General Assembly resolution condemning the invasion, and the other half voted in favour.

While NATO has difficult choices to make in the military/security realm, South Asian capitals are presented with some tough diplomatic and economic choices. Up to now, India has declined to criticise its Russian friend for its aggressive acts. This position is fully consistent with past policy, but increasingly untenable today because the invasion of Ukraine is especially egregious, and because New Delhi's strong security relationship with Washington—stronger even than back in 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea—means India will be under unprecedented pressure to change its stance.

An evacuation of the residents of Irpin, March 6

GETTY IMAGES

RUSSIA'S WAR, LIKE THE PANDEMIC, HAS CHANGED THE WORLD. FOR THOSE FORTUNATE TO SURVIVE COVID, LIFE WILL EVENTUALLY RETURN TO NORMAL. BUT THE WAR'S EFFECTS—STARTING WITH ITS DEVASTATING HUMAN TOLL IN UKRAINE AND EXTENDING TO ITS GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS FOR ECONOMICS, DIPLOMACY, AND GEOPOLITICS—WILL LINGER FOR YEARS

The war poses threats to Indian foreign policy interests, from driving Moscow into Beijing's arms to distracting Washington from countering Chinese power in the Indo-Pacific. India will be pressured to play an unfamiliar but potentially useful role of mediator between Russia and Ukraine.

New Delhi will also be faced with tough choices about future arms imports from Russia. With fresh sanctions in place, Washington will expect New Delhi to dramatically draw down, if not altogether halt, future defence acquisitions from Russia—and especially if, as is likely, it waives India from sanctions for its S-400 purchase. India has reduced its share of Russian arms imports in recent years, but it remains heavily reliant on Moscow. Neither its other arms partners nor its still-plodding indigenous defence production system can quickly fill the gap. India could reduce energy imports from Iran because it developed a Plan B to immediately turn to other Gulf exporters. But India can't go cold turkey on its Russian arms reliance, because of a lack of immediate alternatives.

Then there's Pakistan. Islamabad speaks of engineering a foreign policy shift to "geoeconomics", with a focus on forging deeper trade and connectivity links with Afghanistan and Central Asia—a goal with even greater appeal now that Pakistan's Taliban ally is in power in Kabul. Russia, with its deep influence in Central Asia, is envisaged as a key component of this strategy, and gives Islamabad a strong incentive to strengthen friendship with Moscow.

But the war in Ukraine complicates Pakistan's plans. Russia's coming economic implosion will mean less capacity to provide financial assistance to Central Asian states, which at any rate have reacted with anger to Russia's invasion and may not wish to work with it—on trade and connectivity or anything else. Any direct Russian investment in Afghanistan, which the Taliban would certainly welcome, is also in question. Additionally, Pakistan's prospects for energy cooperation with Russia are in doubt, given the new sanctions regime. Fortunately for Islamabad, it may get a boost from its ally China, which could fill an economic vacuum in Central Asia left by a beleaguered Russia. Still, Pakistan will need to figure out how to carry out its core foreign policy vision now that a key intended player could soon be out of the picture.

Meanwhile, the war presents smaller South Asian states with opportunities—but with a big catch. Moscow will be looking for new markets beyond the West to help boost its struggling economy. Countries like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, where Russia has investments, trade ties, friends, and soft power (through the provision of education scholarships in Russia), may appear attractive to Moscow. Additionally, the smaller South Asian states don't like being battlegrounds for intensifying India-China competition. They may welcome opportunities to escape that tug of war through more engagements with a third power.

But that would be a big risk. There are important trade relationships with the EU, including special trade privileges. Engaging with a sanctioned Russia could jeopardise these important links with Europe, and undermine fragile economies hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic and inflation.

Russia's war, like the pandemic, has changed the world. For those fortunate to survive Covid, life will eventually return to normal. But the war's effects—starting with its devastating human toll in Ukraine and extending to its global implications for economics, diplomacy, and geopolitics—will linger for years. A war with many 20th century characteristics will leave a lasting imprint on a 21st century world. ■

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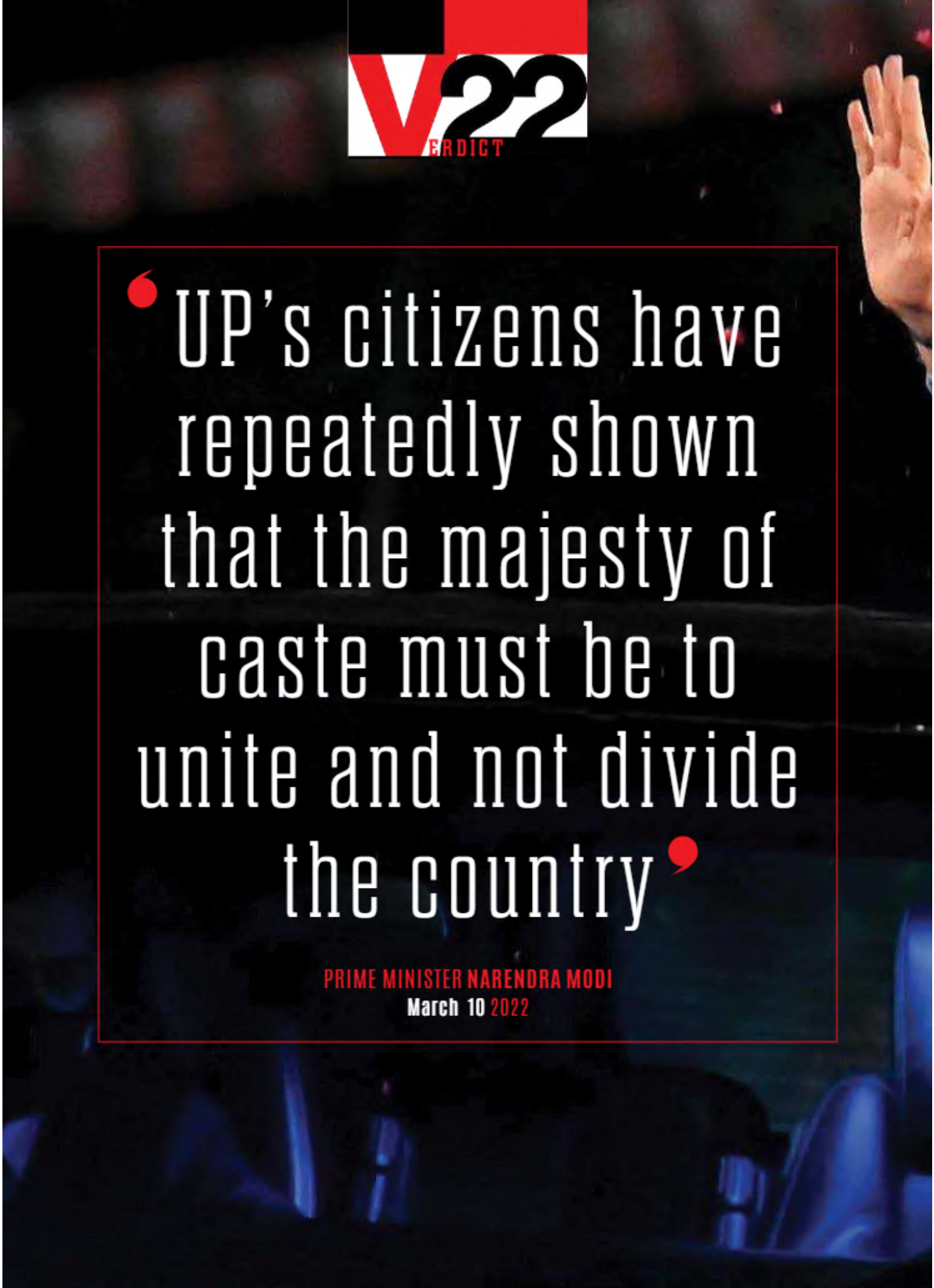



‘UP’s citizens have repeatedly shown that the majesty of caste must be to unite and not divide the country’

PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI
March 10 2022

Photograph by **ASHISH SHARMA**

Photo AFP

V22 VERDICT

‘People have again given their blessings to development and good governance under Prime Minister Narendra Modi’

UTTAR PRADESH CHIEF MINISTER YOGI ADITYANATH
March 10 2022

It was the 'double-engine' magic of Modi-Yogi at work in UP. In the run-up to 2024, the unambiguous message is that leaders like Adityanath will give no quarter to slow-footed rivals

## By PR RAMESH, RAJEEV DESHPANDE AND ULLEKH NP

**Prime Minister Narendra Modi can take a** bow as even his most persistent critics may not be able to grudge him credit for not only neutralising anti-incumbency but also making 'pro-incumbency' saleable at the hustings. Of the states that went to the polls this February and March, the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) big win in Uttar Pradesh (UP) will hold attention, marking as it does a consolidation of the saffron base in India's politically most significant state. But the repeat wins in Uttarakhand and Goa are no less remarkable as these are so-called 'swing' states where either incumbents get turfed out or coalitions are the order of the day. The return to power in Manipur also indicates that BJP's last win was not a fluke and the margin of victory seals Congress' decimation. Modi upstaged all others as the peerless campaigner rallied the masses and was a magnet for fence-sitters. Since occupying the national centrestage as BJP's prime ministerial nominee in 2013, he has redefined election campaigning in India. This time round, too, well into his second term as prime minister, his spell in states his party has won is indisputably obvious.

In Manipur, Goa and Uttarakhand, he had a pivotal role in reversing anti-incumbency trends through energetic campaigns, promising that BJP would make good on its pledges and that the alternative was all about dynasty and "anti-development". In UP, it was the "double-engine" magic of the Modi-Yogi Adityanath duo at work, much to the anguish of those who had poked fun at the expression. Though Modi had dented the domination of Mandal-era caste politics as early as 2014, he has over time become a unifier of a wider social base that has steadily veered towards BJP since he helmed the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government. His overarching vision of nationalist convergence was on display as the results of the five elections trickled in, underlining the political decline of Congress. That BJP was able to make unexpected gains even against anticipated anti-incumbency and sealed the fate of Congress in the Northeast is testament to Modi's force of personality in turning the tide in his party's favour even in the hardest of situations. It also meant that the 'positive' mantra of peace and development in the insurgency-hit Northeast has caught the imagination of the people.

While the caste calculus has seen an overhaul, as on earlier occasions, in these elections, too, the recurring Muslim-Yadav script saved the main contender and Samajwadi Party (SP) scion Akhilesh Yadav from further embarrassment as he vastly trailed expectations. But with the Yadav community becoming increasingly aware of the limitations of this inorganic tie-up, the association may now be under stress thanks to more robust—and rewarding—options for political alignment. These elections, especially in UP, saw a massive and consistent consolidation of non-Yadav Other Backward Classes (OBCs) who continued to repose faith in the much-underrated Modi-Yogi electoral powerhouse.

AFP

**Yogi Adityanath** As the election closed, the discussion in UP was on the likely margin of BJP's win, rather than if it would retain office. At the centre was Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath whose energetic campaign has pitched him to the forefront of BJP's ranks. A big win not only ensures him an unprecedented second term as chief minister but separates him from other NextGen saffron leaders. UP is seen as much as his victory as that of Prime Minister Narendra Modi

**Yogi Adityanath is an early riser who, according to people** close to him, has advanced skills at growing plants. Every day when he is in Lucknow, once his matutinal exercises and prayers are over, one of his inviolable habits, it is said, is to spend time in the lovely garden at the chief ministerial residence where a gooseberry tree enjoys pride of place. Gooseberries from his official home were on display at an agricultural produce exhibition held not long ago at the UP Raj Bhavan. The "super active" chief minister, according to a close aide, still manages to start his work early, reaching his office before 9AM for the task he describes as "watering the state to growth". People close to the powerful monk-politician prefers to believe that his gardening acumen—the intuitive knowledge of 'buts' and 'what ifs' of the craft that minimises mistakes and maximises returns—reflects in the way he cultivates vote banks, is dedicated to nurse the state from its poor reputation, and mulches his way into reaping the fruits of hard work.

Whether one finds logic in such a comparison or not, where Adityanath scores full marks is where his rivals and detractors

Photos GETTY IMAGES

**Akhilesh Yadav** Switching alliances and lowering the 'anti-Hindutva' rhetoric did not work for the SP chief. SP's vote increased and seats more than doubled but could not reach the tipping point despite strong backing of the numerous Muslim vote. A second successive election loss (apart from Lok Sabha failures) may result in desertions as defeat sinks in and it becomes apparent that 'OBC defections' from BJP did not help. However, on the upside, he will be leader of the opposition and an 'alternative' to BJP

**Mayawati** She played a lone hand but it did not work as BSP's votes slipped steeply. The magic that saw upper castes and Muslims power the party to a majority in 2007 did not happen. Her loyal following of Jatavs stayed largely with her, but the drift of other Dalit castes, evident since 2014, continues. This will worry her as, like SP, BSP too looks to leverage the caste of a candidate plus the Dalit vote to secure wins. If the base is eroding, it can mean Jatavs will be vulnerable to poaching as well

**Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi** The poor returns are evidence that Congress is just not getting its mojo back. The Punjab fiasco will hurt the most given that six-eight months ago Congress looked a shoo-in to retain office. Congress loyalists insist Lok Sabha polls will be different as the party is the only 'national' alternative to BJP. But the ranks of the G23 might swell as restiveness over the party's future increases. As polls show, the Gandhi siblings have no vote-getting ability. Sonia Gandhi's long nightwatchman vigil will continue

have underrated and underestimated him: in endearing himself to women voters and the poor besides bringing order in a state notorious for its lawlessness, as voting patterns suggest. The result: returning to power in a state where no other incumbent chief minister has done so after a full term, a feat that carries him to the apex of electoral glory. Not only has his party won in pockets where it was expected to suffer setbacks for a flurry of reasons, including farmer protests, an alliance between influential caste groups, alleged disenchantment of backwards and the poor and so on, but it decimated the opposition even in its traditional strongholds against what was considered insurmountable odds. Its advance in western UP, an area affected by the farm agitation, and where SP and the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) came together, is a case in point.

As with Adityanath, who started off with a negative perception of being an individualist and intemperate, he has now become simply the first among son-of-the-soil BJP leaders in the state to acquire a halo and use that charisma to lead his government and party on the fast track of political gain. Of course, one of his predecessors, the late Kalyan Singh, did have tremendous mass appeal in his prime, but then his influence was largely confined to certain groups, including hardliners among the Hindutva fold and sections of OBCs, Singh himself being one: from the Lodh Rajput community. Adityanath has become an icon of the youth and earned the support of women voters.

From that context, Adityanath, with the blessings of Modi (the photo of the prime minister with his hand on Adityanath's shoulder was a defining moment), singularly breaks multiple barriers of UP politics and busts theories that arguably support a certain view aired by pundits who have not seen the new trend coming. "I have come to break myths," he told *Open* in a recent interview ('Security Is the Foundation of Vikas and Good Governance', March 14). It is a trend that marks the fraying of old ways and announces realignment of caste equations in the most populous and complex state that sends the most number of lawmakers to Parliament. His opponents seem apoplectic about his rise and also about his style of governance that is strict and no-nonsense. But the 49-year-old, who has, thanks to this stunning victory, entered the league of BJP's all-time luminaries, has proved to be light years ahead of his detractors and their politics stuck in the quicksand of 1990s Mandal-era caste dynamics. Caste affinities and identities are not going to disappear, but across caste groups there is a rethink on what works best for them: vote for governance and an umbrella organisation or vote for caste or withering regional entities? They seem to have chosen the former, denting, in the process, once entrenched, entitled and self-styled contractors of caste. The poll reverses of OBC leaders, including former BJP minister Swami Prasad Maurya who joined SP ahead of this year's polls in a dramatic move, confirms new realities. The so-called OBC rebellion never happened.

While the emphatic win in this year's election helps the BJP-led coalition recover from the drubbing it received in West Bengal last summer, Adityanath finds himself catapulted into a larger-than-life figure, next only to Modi whose sway over the state's voters remains intact. Modi found in Adityanath just the right fit. The tout ensemble, as BJP insiders argue, is the emergence of the double-engine that decimated hyped mobilisations around farm discontent, inflation woes and lack of jobs in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The denouement of the polls in UP, which saw a more or less bipolar contest between BJP and challenger SP, is symptomatic of much more than that: it further weakens the opposition nationwide in the run-up to the 2024 General Election with no credible alternative in sight for the Modi-led BJP juggernaut. Akhilesh Yadav, whose last win was in 2012 at the expense of his father and pater familias of the once dominant SP Inc, Mulayam Singh Yadav, has lost consecutively for the fourth time—in 2014, 2017, 2019 and 2022—failing to secure victory in his own right. The other contenders, however minor they may have appeared in this election, such as the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) of former chief minister and Dalit leader Mayawati and Congress' Priyanka Gandhi, who apparently addressed 209 rallies and roadshows in the state, surpassing even Adityanath who spoke at 203 poll events, bit the dust. The downward spiral of SP, BSP as well as Congress, all of whom had dominated UP's politics either in the pre- or post-Mandal years, proves once again that the rules of engagement in the north Indian heartland have changed for good. Congress and the rest have fallen victim to electoral tactics and traits from the pre-2014 period of Indian politics and failed to win over a wider social base. Priyanka Gandhi, Mayawati and Akhilesh Yadav have all turned out to be wrong people in the wrong place at the wrong time with the ground beneath their feet slipping away. Especially when gauged against high expectations prior to the announcement of the results, the SP scion's failure to pull in as many votes as anticipated bring to the fore the political limitations and lack of vision on his watch. BJP's gains even in Lakhimpur Kheri, where some farmers were killed during a protest against the now-repealed farm laws and which in turn reportedly triggered passions against the party, are proof of the opposition's failure to cash in on opportunities. As a result, UP, too, has come under the spell of the Gujarat model of politics where the nearest contender to BJP is many notches down and insignificant.

**By and large, BJP, with the ascent of Modi, has internalised** the teachings of socialist thinker Ram Manohar Lohia, who was also a man of action and placed utmost importance on the removal of segregations of caste as well as gender. According to him, caste and gender biases were primarily responsible for the decline of the spirit in India. He wanted any effort to eradicate poverty to be complemented by elimination of discrimination of women. He had called for an all-out war on what we now call toxic masculinity besides larger representation for backward classes that was immortalised in the slogan, "Samyukt Socialist Party *ne baandhi gaat, pichade paave sau mein saath* (SSP, or Samyukta Socialist Party, has made a vow that backward should get a share of 60 out of 100)." Lohia's 60 per cent included women, but under SP, which claims his legacy, it was largely meant for a single community, the Yadavs. In Adityanath's victory, women became the vanguard of his success story. That is not surprising considering the time and energy he expended on implementation of women-centric programmes that covered all key aspects in the lives of women, from prenatal

health and birth and free rations, affordable food, nutrition and overall health, financial aid for primary and higher education, self-employment, small loans and sustained livelihood support for the socio-economically weak, besides better law and order. All of this unleashed a silent revolution among women in favour of his government, resulting in an unprecedented 11 per cent hike in women voter participation (by the end of the second-last phase of voting) in the just-concluded Assembly election. To be precise, welfare schemes for women in the state went far beyond the much-talked about Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana that started in 2016, fully subsidising the security deposit and other charges for gas cylinders of different sizes to BPL families. The crucial schemes post-2017 included the Bhagya Laxmi Yojana which provided financial aid to girls from poor families in the form of bonds worth ₹50,000 right up to graduation, the Annapurna canteens in several district tier 2/3 towns forking out breakfast, lunch and dinner at a total daily spend of only ₹13 per person, the Kayakalp scheme to improve the condition and education quality in government schools to encourage girl children to continue their studies to arrest dropouts due to social issues related to health and hygiene. The School Chalo Abhiyan supports girl students with school uniforms, shoes and so on (has benefited over 60 lakh girl students and supports the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao). Besides, there was a raft of others, too, including the CM Kanya Sumangala Yojana which provided financial support of ₹15,000 for education, the CM Samuhik Vivah Yojana, that gave ₹51,000 to girls from poor families (over two lakh women stood to benefit), the Suposhan Yojana under which families are funded for nutritious food and families that can keep cows at home are provided with a cow and ₹900 to get free milk for the family. The Mahila Samartya Yojana also provides financial support to women's help groups that help women in rural areas become self-reliant and the Central government's Swamitra Yojana facilitates women of families to get their properties registered in their names.

Merely listing these is an arduous task, and much more Herculean was their successful execution that made Adityanath a darling in the state's households. Similarly, the thrust of the poor too clicked, as explained later.

Targeting women for welfare measures by itself was synonymous with outreach to the poor. During his stint as chief minister, Adityanath roped in banks to train over 70,000 women to work as banking correspondent *sakhi*s to ensure last-mile connectivity. Building of 2.61 crore new toilets was meant to offer safety and dignity for women. Nearly 70 lakh free gas connections were provided to eligible women and women from over 40 lakh families were beneficiaries of the PM Awas Yojana.

That's not all. As Adityanath said recently to *Open* in an interview, "The foundation of vikas and good governance is security...A state like UP is today talking of security and good governance. This is a good sign and people are appreciating it." In fact, he was being euphemistic at best. Adityanath's coup de grace to parties that had been in power and did nothing to improve the piteous law and order situation in the state was to launch a ruthless crusade against dons and gangsters who had enjoyed political patronage in the past but now find themselves in jail. That earned him goodwill across a wider social base that his rivals didn't immediately take note of. Women voters, cutting across the rural-urban, caste, community and class divides, were impressed. Soon, the Mahila Shakti Mission set up women's help desks with adequate police backing in 350 districts in the first phase. More than 218 fasttrack courts were set up to deal with crimes against women, including domestic violence. More importantly, helplines swung into action and 20 per cent of the police personnel in the state police are now women. More efforts are afoot to raise their representation in the forces. Adityanath also unveiled schemes to light up the streets of towns and cities across the state to bring down crimes against women in a state once infamous for power outages and gender crime.

**It is not that BJP went to the polls expecting a cake walk, as** Union Home Minister Amit Shah himself reminded the cadre time and again that each election throws up unexpected challenges and polls, after all, have to be won. But unlike in 2017, the party and its allies had much more to brandish in terms of governance and leadership. Back then, the flagship scheme was Ujjwala and the party had no chief ministerial face ahead of the Assembly polls. It wasn't a bipolar contest back then with SP and Congress in alliance and BSP on its own, opening up a triangular competition. But BJP came out triumphant, winning 312 seats on its own, up 265 seats from five years earlier. SP lost 177 seats to win only 47. BSP won 19, down 61 from 2012 and Congress a mere 7 from 28 earlier. BJP repeated its grand show in the 2019 re-election of Modi as prime minister against a grand alliance of BSP and SP that seemed to have caste arithmetic favouring them. But results proved otherwise: the BJP alliance won 64 of 89 Lok Sabha seats and the BSP-SP alliance 15 and Congress a single seat—that of Sonia Gandhi from Rae Bareli; her son Rahul Gandhi was among the prominent losers.

Notably, Adityanath's endurance has to be weighed against the scales of myriad challenges he faced, including the pandemic, which caused panic-stricken migrant workers to return to their villages in his state, and the concomitant loss of jobs in the face of unprecedented uncertainty amidst the scourge. *Open* has written extensively about how the Adityanath-led UP government's Covid strategy was remarkable not only in terms of spending on public health but also in empowering nodal officers who could think and act on their feet. It was a radical break from the state's earlier reputation as a laggard and it led in terms of scale of vaccination and improved ease of doing business ranking, and in building infrastructure and in bringing under its welfare net large sections of groups ignored by previous dispensations. Last year, the government won praise from the Supreme Court for rising to the occasion when people who had migrated from the state to cities returned during the Covid-induced lockdown. The court said on June 28, 2021: "The state of UP is maintaining a robust system of registration of such migrant workers as they come into the state. A portal... has been created on which all relevant details of all migrant workers are to be uploaded in real-time. As per the data available with the director, training and employment, Uttar Pradesh, as many as 37,84,255 migrant workers have returned to their native places

during the entire Covid-19 pandemic period."

The surge in UP's infrastructure development is a story on its own. It was stellar even in health and education. Adityanath said recently to *Open*, "Look at UP's health infrastructure, between 1947 and 2017, only 12 medical colleges came up. We are in the process of setting up a medical college in each of the 75 districts. We have seen 39 colleges come up in the government sector." The state has a capacity of four lakh Covid tests a day and ICUs in every district.

Again, in the five states—UP, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Manipur and Goa—where Assembly polls were held, the electorate has clearly moved on beyond certain election myths. That is especially true of UP, which has historically been projected as an underachiever. *Open* had examined at length this subject earlier ('Five Myths About How India Votes', February 7, 2022). These elections vindicate our observations about misconceptions and misinformation about the state that include its being a place that lacks basic amenities such as power, roads and water; and that there exists a formidable Jat-Muslim alliance against BJP; that the farmers mobilised for the massive strike against the farm laws were inimical to the Centre and state; and that OBCs are a monolith who stand with SP which, ironically, incurred the wrath of non-Yadav OBCs over decades for never giving them their due in exchange for votes. Another myth laid to rest was the projection of a composite Dalit vote bank that would not vote for any entity other than BSP. With BJP, as stated earlier, offering an umbrella for all socio-economic groups and covering them in its ambitious schemes, such myths stand exposed and are awaiting a burial.

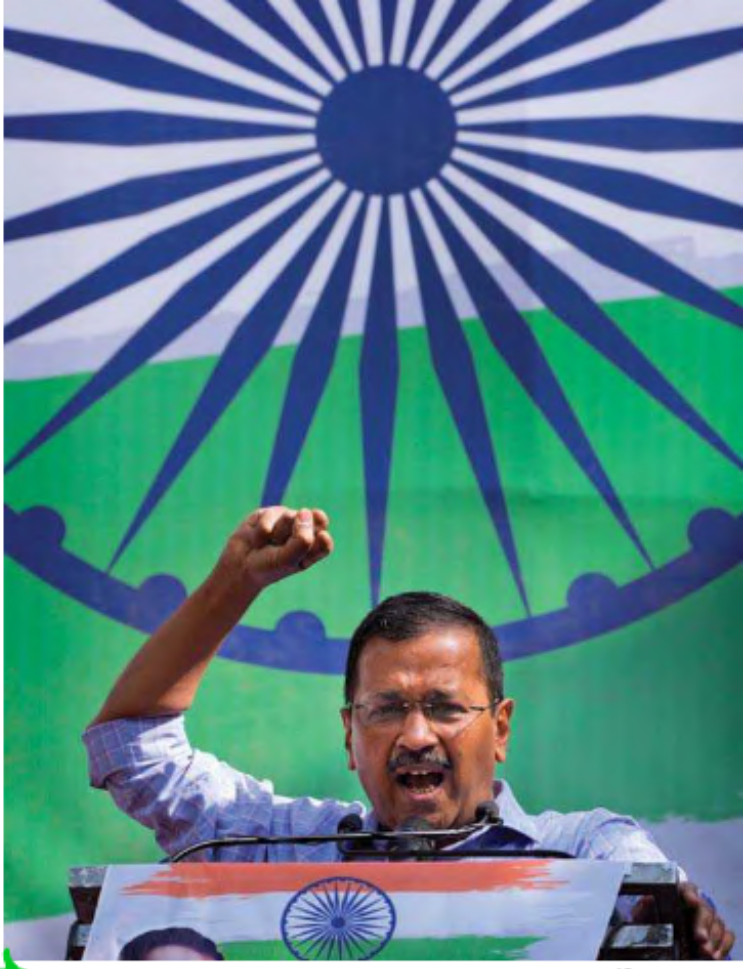
Along with such formulations, another claim has been disposed of: that Muslims can hold a veto in elections. The re-assertion of Hindutva forces, coupled with welfare for all, irrespective of caste and religion, has done away with any preferential treatment for any section and replaced it with an all-encompassing package of social justice.

**This election was definitive in more ways than one.**

For instance, the Muslim-Yadav combination was peddled as a 'natural alliance' forged on the common belief in a composite culture. Political pundits touted it as one of the finest examples of robust grassroots secularism.

Contrary to the depiction of this social coalition as rooted in very natural traditions of Hindu-Muslim amity, this was actually a relatively a new phenomenon. Both communities were part of the big Congress tent at a time when virtually every slice of the social rainbow was represented in the Grand Old Party and remained so for several decades prior to the tectonic shift of Yadavs that began in the 1960s. In the mid-1960s, Yadavs as a community started leaving the very crowded and politically claustrophobic Congress fold dominated by the upper castes and started drifting towards socialist platforms, driven by Lohia's political ideology. This shift was prompted by the realisation that miniscule upper castes in Congress were using numerically preponderant sections to institutionalise their hold on electoral politics.

In the watershed year of 1967, the intermediate castes were able to display their political clout in a manifest way and signal a crucial shift in electoral and social dynamics. And translate this into electoral seats. This saw the establishment of the Samyukta Vidhayak Dal (SVD) governments in UP and Bihar. Mulayam Singh Yadav, then of Samyukta Socialist Party, became a first-time MLA in that year, as did Kalyan Singh, of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh. In UP, this was the first non-Congress government, led by Chaudhary Charan Singh. The development remained limited to UP and Bihar. Though there were no Jats in eastern UP, he got the backing of farming communities and intermediate castes like the Yadavs and the Kurmis, a support that sustained up to the mid-1980s.



AP

**Arvind Kejriwal** The 'Delhi model' clicked in Punjab and how even if it did not fly in Uttarakhand and Goa. AAP has breached a significant frontier and the success has catapulted Arvind Kejriwal into the front ranks of non-NDA leaders. Congress' in-house shenanigans and a fractured field helped but AAP's model of alternative politics and its poll sops message have been revalidated outside the national capital. The party gains from voter disenchantment with traditional choices and a fatigue with business-as-usual. Projecting a recognised face as chief ministerial choice aided the AAP cause and holds lessons for the future

While Yadavs chose to remain outside the Congress umbrella since the late 1960s, the Muslim vote stayed firmly with the party in the 1971 elections which the party won. But in 1977, when Congress got drubbed in the General Election, every community deserted the party. 1980 was a classic case that demonstrated the hollow claim of traditional amity and electoral unity between the Muslim and backward-class voters: the latter remained outside Congress but Muslims backed the party, as also in 1984. The Muslim community vote left Congress in the 1989 elections, but only partly, to back the platform floated by VP Singh. But it was not wholesale support, since BJP was part of that alliance. Muslim voters left Congress for two reasons: one, the pull exerted by VP Singh and two, a less talked about event that showed Congress in poor light: the Bhagalpur riots. The riots of 1989 in Bihar's Bhagalpur involved Hindu-Muslim violence that started on October 24 that year and carried on for a whole of two months, engulfing the city and some 250 surrounding villages. Over 1,000 people were killed and another 50,000 reportedly displaced as a consequence of the violence. It was considered the worst instance of Hindu-Muslim violence in independent India at the time and continued to resonate years later. (In 2015, Nitish Kumar, despite an alliance with Congress, played the card prior to the elections by setting up a probe that denounced the riots as a "national shame" and "barbaric", a telling indictment of the SN Sinha Congress government of the time.)

Attempts to woo Muslims as a community for their votes gained momentum significantly after the 1989 elections, in which VP Singh got the support of Mulayam Singh Yadav in UP, Lalu Prasad in Bihar and Sharad Yadav in Madhya Pradesh despite the presence of BJP in the anti-Congress coalition. Jats went with him, too. The Mandal Commission report implementation during his stint firmly cemented OBC support behind him. Until then, socialists had little reservation about aligning with BJP, but post-1989, Mulayam Singh refused to go with BJP. Mulayam Singh was the first Yadav leader to defy the prevailing socialist line. In fact, a serious difference of opinion had emerged between him and Karpoori Thakur at the time and these differences began to come out in the open. Socialists until then, including Lohia himself, had freely partnered with the Jana Sangh and later, BJP. For them, anti-Congressism was the dominant ideology. Lohiaites believed, and rightly so, that Congress, bolstered by its first mover advantage and a historic legacy, remained formidable as long as the opposition remained divided.

The disintegration of Congress began in the late 1980s when the upper castes, too, began deserting the party. Muslims, who saw BJP as the problematic issue, started scouting around for the most viable political option for defeating BJP. That would lead them to versatility in exercising their options—in some geographies, they aligned with the Janata Dal; in some others, they dumped it for better political options. In UP and Bihar, Muslims concluded that since upper castes had more or less left Congress, it had ceased to be the key option for them to keep BJP at bay.

The new political option came in the form of Mulayam Singh in 1989. His victory could not have been described as a Muslim-Yadav victory because he was the chief minister of Janata Party that enjoyed support across communities. (The state Assembly elections were held along with the Lok Sabha polls.) However, Mulayam Singh had started robustly playing the 'secularism' trope to build and cement his credentials as the key voice against BJP in UP. Muslims and Yadavs, thanks to their sheer numbers, made for a very powerful electoral combination. In UP and Bihar, their combined share in the voting population was close to 27 per cent. So, any leader who gained their support started with a solid backing of 27 per cent of voters.

The graph of Muslim and Yadav electoral support to parties and leaders shows a clear ebb and flow, both separately and together, based on sheer, unsentimental power calculations that had little to do with ideology or the claims of communal amity.

There was competition among the Yadav community's biggest leaders to be seen on the right side of Muslims. Several conspiracy

## Charanjit Singh Channi

He tried to play a whirlwind innings as Congress' 'Dalit' choice for Punjab but had Navjot Singh Sidhu at the other end, a partner more interested in running out the chief minister. If he had won, he could have hoped to be leader of the rump party, waiting for a revival. But having lost both seats he contested, he has nothing to show and will go down as a sacrificial lamb who briefly replaced Amarinder Singh as chief minister

## Navjot Singh Sidhu

The temperamental politician's fortunes have fluctuated wildly in the past year. He was the Gandhi family's instrument to dislodge Amarinder Singh but did not get the cherished chief minister's post. Being a Gandhi favourite did not stop him from lashing out against the leadership. In the end, he was seen as, ironically enough, too much of his own man. Now, a loss on his home turf marks a new low

theories made the rounds on why BJP stalwart LK Advani was arrested during the Ram Rath Yatra in Bihar. He was headed for UP. Anyone would like his state to be free of trouble. VP Singh also had the option of arresting Advani, who was entering Bihar by the Rajdhani Express, before the train had reached the state. However, some claim that VP Singh was apprehensive that if Advani were arrested in UP, Mulayam Singh would get the political advantage and become a taller hero than himself. Mulayam Singh had already earned immense credits for tough 'secularism' by ordering the state police to fire on the *kar sevak*s and his unwholesome statements on Ram. The arrest of Advani would have been another feather in his political cap, boosted his cult image and would have made him unstoppable.

In the 1991 Lok Sabha polls, after all that he did to curry favour with the community—firing on *kar sevak*s, etc—Muslims deserted Mulayam Singh. In that election, Mulayam Singh got only four seats. The Janata Dal did much better although VP Singh was almost a spent force after the collapse of his national government in November 1990. Mulayam Singh went with Chandra Shekhar's Janata Dal (Socialist) and remained in the chief minister's seat in Lucknow with the support of Congress. But his government fell when Congress withdrew support in April 1991 after it first withdrew support to the Chandra Shekhar government in New Delhi. Chaudhary Ajit Singh's writ did not run beyond a few pockets around Baghpat in western UP, despite his father's legacy. Muslims did not consider Mulayam Singh's party as a credible vehicle to defeat BJP and refused to get swayed by old-fashioned considerations of gratitude and indebtedness. They were realistic and went by the sole calculation of backing the party best suited to defeat BJP. In the midterm elections to the UP Assembly in mid-1991, Mulayam Singh's party lost power to BJP.

The Yadav leadership, too, was a divided lot. After the collapse of the HD Deve Gowda government in 1997, Sharad Yadav and Lalu Prasad joined hands to scuttle the chances of Mulayam Singh for the prime minister's post. Despite all the myth-making that these social alliances were forged in ideology, common belief in secularism, etc, they were based on hard-nosed, clear-eyed political calculations.

Part of the reason why the Muslim community in both UP and Bihar chose to go with the Yadavs could have been the calculation that leaders from the community would be more acceptable to the entire spectrum of OBC communities. That, however, generated a backlash the moment Yadavs got a bigger slice of political power. The caste groupings among OBCs resented the exercise of power by Yadavs as the new elite.

It was only to be expected that in many locales, Kurmis, Koeris or Lodhs were just as better, or worse, off as the Yadavs. Moreover, since they fought together, they could not be expected to be reverential to the Yadav leadership. They saw the Yadavs as equals and refused to be in awe of their political clout or resigned to it.

The Yadav leaders were challenged mainly by other OBC leaders. In Bihar, Lalu Prasad's inability to take along other castes in the OBC spectrum benefitted Nitish Kumar and BJP. In UP, BJP and BSP have been most successful in winning the support of large sections of non-Yadav OBCs, as demonstrated by Kalyan Singh two decades ago.

The result is certain to boost the confidence of BJP that with sustained work, it can attract significant sections of backwards into its fold. If it meets with significant success, it would be the undoing of the great 'secular' experiment and the collapse of the hyped MY trope. Then Yadavs would lose their value and effectiveness as secular allies of Muslims, making them vulnerable to poaching by others.

**On the far wall in his office is an imposing, giant screen.** This is the room in which he meets bureaucrats at his 5 Kalidas Marg residence each morning to unfailingly and diligently run through the implementation status of various schemes and programmes initiated over the five years of his tenure. The numbers on the wall are live feed and a 24X7 check on the dozens of Central and state yojanas for the residents of UP. Glitches are discussed, good work acknowledged, weaknesses in delivery mechanisms ironed out, additions, expansion and tweaking of existing schemes all planned in minute detail.

Adityanath's work ethic is a seamless extension of his life ethics: no frills and fancies and a focused dedication to the work at hand: governance. On the day *Open* met him was the last day of the poll campaign for the third phase of polling. There was a hectic last-minute dash by all key players to meet deadlines and wrap up key rallies, roadshows and addresses. Adityanath, star campaigner for his own party and government, was scheduled to address four poll rallies by the end of day and was to leave urgently for various places at 11 AM. At 9 AM, two hours prior to departure, there would have been last-minute exigencies to be attended to prior to his leaving, hustle and bustle by the security personnel, urgent issues for bureaucrats to deal with and hectic pushing and shoving by political leaders and their cloying hangers-on, with their dozens of flashy SUVs cramming the driveway, all claiming the chief minister's

**Amarinder Singh**

The alliance with BJP did not do well at all. But BJP is likely to remember the line he threw to the party at a time when the farm law agitation had created a divide between the saffron outfit and the Sikh community. Given his stature and legacy of the Patiala royal family, he might get an honourable assignment but losing his seat is a harsh blow

immediate attention. But at the chief minister's residence, there was none of this clutter, confusion and needless theatrics. No political workers thronging or cringe-worthy platoons of hangers-on. Only his staff and a handful of officials dotted the landscape. Adityanath had calmly gone through with his daily interaction with the bureaucrats in the early hours of the morning prior to leaving for his campaign tour. His simple, stark and effective style of functioning marked a departure from the 'band, *baaja, baaraat*' show that had been a permanent fixture at the residence of the chief minister of UP for decades. It was even a source of acute discomfiture to many in the administration and his own political ecosystem. That morning, going through the implementation of schemes and programmes custom-tailored for the women of his state, Adityanath dwelt on his hands-on interest in their successful implementation by narrating an incident of his visit to a Mushahar habitation on one occasion. One of the women there, clearly hard working but in tattered clothes and tired demeanour, was among those he met. Asked if she was benefitting from his government's schemes, the woman told him that she and her family had no "colony", a synonym for state-sponsored housing for eligible citizens from economically weaker sections and communities such as hers. Adityanath immediately summoned the official concerned and directed that her details be taken and she be allotted state housing. Six months later, on a repeat tour of the same habitation, the woman welcomed the "Baba" to her two-room abode. Was she now making a living then, he had asked her. She replied that her husband now earned from push-cart (*redhi*) sale of vegetables and she had been saving money with which she planned to buy a bullock and link herself to the government's scheme for sale of cow dung. "The poor are needy, not greedy. They just need that firm hand up to make a start and they are hard working enough to chart a course for a dignified living by themselves. They are not looking, unlike others, for freebies and handouts and largesse," he replied to a question on whether he planned to ensure that she and her family got employment for a sustained livelihood. When the poor say "*aapka namak khaya hai*", Adityanath maintained it should not be read as a sign of abject servility but of thanks for a hand-up, a legitimate and rightful opportunity to start fixing their own issues. Far from being a phrase that takes away agency, it should be seen as one that reinforces their agency, Adityanath noted.

Adityanath's way of conducting business is a departure from the flashy ways of previous governments. His work ethic and style of functioning, quietly focusing on carpet-bombing essential welfare services and schemes on all sections of society, alongside special group-targeting, gave momentum to a critical mass of support to his government, fuelled by public trust in his ability for good governance. Together, that style highlighted the sharp contrast with the governments run by SP in the pre-2017 period and the tendency of SP leaders, not excluding Akhilesh Yadav, to turn their governments into some sort of Yadav Inc, a private limited company with the community's rigid monopoly on wielding power and influence across the spectrum, from industry to agriculture to infrastructure to all things economic and political in the massive state. Unsurprisingly, Adityanath's method triggered heartburn, complaints and anger. There were also many efforts to paint him as a chief minister who was brazenly biased towards his caste brethren. Stories were circulated about upper-caste Brahmin members of his administration being sidelined, neglected, unjustly ignored and they, in turn, fuelled a contrived narrative of a social rupture among the upper castes with the Brahmins. There was also another price to pay for his work style that unflinchingly demanded accountability at all levels of the administration.

Modi's faith in his handpicked man to head UP never wavered, right through his adept handling of the Covid wave, the protests against CAA-NRC. (Adityanath was the first to pass an executive order that would allow the state government to confiscate the property of those charged with destroying public assets during the protests.) Although it is now being challenged through the courts, the move nonetheless received much public praise. His focused and aggressive implementation of Central and state welfare delivered both essential rations to all needy and money transfers. "What's truly impressive is that he doesn't rely on speeches and briefs written by bureaucrats during Covid-19 combat strategy meetings with the prime minister. He would use the precise time allotted to him to succinctly explain his government's performance on the agenda items listed for the meeting," an official in the know said.

**Modi and Yogi complement each other perfectly in many** ways, making for a powerful political duo that is virtually unbeatable at the hustings and a combination of forces, at the Centre and the state, and one that could power a favourable electoral tsunami for the "double-engine sarkar". The unwavering backing from Modi to Adityanath did not come only on account of the latter's stellar governance skills, his determination and his work ethics; they share a whole worldview.

Of the two, one belongs to the OBC community and the other to an upper caste. But there were many things in common in their lives. Both hailed from economically weak families. Modi, the only one in his family of six siblings to not change his surname, hailed from the backward Modh-Ghanchi caste. Modi's mother Heeraben's own journey of struggle to raise her six children after the demise of her husband is often narrated to illustrate the modest means of his background and the hardships he had to endure. Growing up in a relatively poor household and having none of the privileges of children of his age from better-off families also meant that Modi was determined to make a mark in life. In turning around the fortunes of the party in Gujarat—a feat considered impossible at the time decades ago—to his emerging as the super chief minister before he took over the reins himself for the next 15 years in Gandhinagar, Modi made it his mission in life to turn adversities into opportunities. And then, in 2014, he was elevated to the prime minister's office of the largest democracy in the world by a stupendous electoral victory.

Like Modi, Adityanath, too, came from a large family of many siblings and graduated in mathematics. Hailing from the Nath community of the Thakur/Kshatriya caste, his father was a forest department official and his mother, Savitri Devi, a homemaker. His sister sold tea at a shanty. With no political background to his family,

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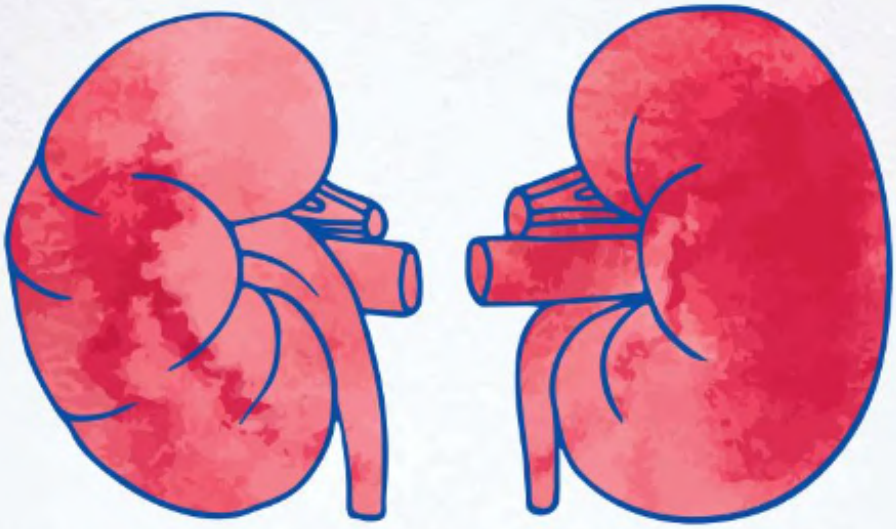

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While many of us may have experienced Covid as a cough, flu or a viral infection for a few days, the virus has had life-threatening concerns for those with co-morbidities or immune-compromised health conditions. Hospitals, already under immense pressure during the initial phases of the pandemic, found the biggest challenge for them was managing along with COVID patients, individuals with cancer, kidney failure or who were on immunosuppressants for treatment of severe diseases. Such individuals who are already vulnerable because of their compromised health become even more susceptible to aggravated Covid symptoms. In this situation one of the major things that put the spotlight on kidney healthcare has been the outcome of patients with chronic kidney diseases during the Covid-19 pandemic. The number of people suffering from kidney disease is continuously on the rise in India. Chronic kidney disease (CKD) is common and harmful: 1 out of 10 adults worldwide have it, and if left untreated, it can be deadly.[1] Early detection allows for disease care and management to help prevent morbidity and mortality, and improve cost effectiveness and sustainability.

**We continue to educate people on preventing kidney diseases, treating kidney disease and have one of the most comprehensive and affordable transplant programs."**

Narayana Health was the pioneering initiative (as Narayana Hrudayalaya) of the internationally renowned cardiac surgeon, Dr. Devi Prasad Shetty, to bring low-cost cardiac surgery in India. Dr. Shetty later extended affordable quality care models to all key healthcare specialties and ensured that the prohibitive cost of treatment did not come in the way of helping people live better lives. Though Narayana Health's roots are deeply embedded in Southern India, the brand has now established its presence in North India with three hospitals: Narayana Hospital Gurugram, Dharamshila Narayana Superspeciality Hospital, Delhi and Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Narayana Superspeciality Hospital, Katra. The group has also partnered to develop a 220- bedded greenfield project in Ludhiana which is planned as a leading Quaternary Care Centre much needed in the region.

While Comprehensive Kidney Care, Affordable Dialysis Services and an experienced team of Nephrologists & Urologists are available at all hospitals of

**COMMANDER NAVNEET BALI,**
Regional Director– North,
Narayana Health

*1: https://www.kidneycareuk.org/news-and-campaigns/news/estimated-1-10-people-worldwide-have-chronic-kidney-disease/*

the Group in the North, each of these hospitals also boasts of its individualistic approach, experience and a growth journey to reaching their milestones.

**NARAYANA HOSPITAL GURUGRAM** features a state-of-the art and affordable Dialysis and Kidney Transplant Unit with doctors trained in the finest institutes in India and overseas, all working together as a cohesive team and giving a new lease of life to patients with kidney failure. The Team has also shown proven sustainable results in highly sensitized and ABO-incompatible Kidney Transplants.

The Renal Sciences Team at the hospital, in addition to receiving several prestigious awards for the work in the field, has also been recognised for its clinical achievements in several national and international journals and publications. The team is driven by its deep conviction that devotion and care can bring healing, comfort, and hope in the life of patients.

In our country where getting donors from within the family itself is a challenge and in many situations individuals requiring a transplant have to depend on deceased unrelated donors through a registered wait list, a heart-warming tale unfolded recently at Narayana Hospital Gurugram, where a couple underwent successful kidney transplant with a mother being donated a kidney by her daughter and the father being donated the kidney by the daughter- in -law.

**DHARAMSHILA NARAYANA SUPERSPECIALITY HOSPITAL,** Delhi which has its legacy of over a quarter century as a Cancer Hospital has also set up an Organ Transplant Unit in addition to multi-speciality expertise over the last 4 years. The hospital boasts of one of the most affordable and high-quality dialysis units as well as a kidney transplant expertise in the region with good success rates even in ABO and HLA-incompatible cases. When COVID struck the Department stayed connected with its patients who planned on transplants or had already undergone transplants through its Video Consultation Program. In addition to being a hub for high quality kidney care, the hospital has also recently received approval from Diplomate of National Board for training doctors in Nephrology. The Renal Sciences team at the hospital has not just been treating kidney diseases, but has also been at forefront for helping people understand how to prevent kidney diseases and has initiated several preventive programs which have been recognized in the local communities. Featuring the region's one of the few Advanced High Precision Robotic Surgery System and trained Uro Surgeons, the hospital can improve clinical outcome for patients by reducing blood loss, hospital stay and surgical incisions.

The Teams at both these hospitals boast of experience and expertise in the field of Uro-Oncology and have had good success rates in over 1000 Kidney Transplants they have conducted.

Katra is a nucleus for not only being one of the most visited pilgrimage sites in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K), it has the most advanced medical facilities in the region and other surrounding areas which lack super speciality and quaternary care. **SHRI MATA VAISHNO DEVI NARAYANA SUPERSPECIALITY HOSPITAL, KATRA,** boasts of one of the most comprehensive renal care units in J&K; it is equipped with state-of- the-art dialysis facilities, experienced nephrologists and urologists, a dedicated operation theatre and trained paramedical nurses. When most other dialysis centres in the region were struggling because of the pandemic, the team at SMVDNSH ensured that the vital services needed for sustaining their lives were uninterrupted; the team worked apace to ensure that Covid-appropriate measures were taken for the safety of immunity-compromised patients who were vulnerable to the slightest of infections. Presently the hospital is also in its final talks with the Government authorities to start its kidney transplant program.

"Since dialysis is a repetitive modality which a patient has to go through, we understand the psychological, financial and physical trauma that patients and their attendants have to go through and help with their life cycle not just inside the hospital but also at their homes. We are also in track for implementing our integrated healthcare model which would ensure hand holding of every individual not only in times of suffering from diseases but also hand holding them in their wellness journey. Dr Devi Shetty's vision of democratizing healthcare through digital platforms has enabled creation of NH Care App and NH Care Portal - are a result of tireless effort of our IT teams to develop a technology to help people across to access affordable healthcare and help receive optimal advice despite mobility challenges.

One of the most devastating effects COVID had was on kidney patients. Before and after Covid, Narayana Health continues the special focus on kidney health of the society. We continue to educate people on preventing kidney diseases, treating kidney disease and have one of the most comprehensive and affordable transplant programs. We have a team of over 50 Nephrologists, Urologists, dedicated transplant coordinators, paramedical staff in North region trained in finest institutions of the country and abroad who dedicatedly help patients lead a healthy life.

On our website one can see all the procedures offered along with their costs. So apart from being clinically outstanding we have also prioritized transparency and ethicality. To access this truly comprehensive Renal Care we have a single toll free number 18003090309, patients can also use our NH Care to access all these which can be downloaded using the QR code below," says Commander Navneet Bali, Regional Director - Northern Region, Narayana Health. ■

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**Pushkar Singh Dhami** Pulled off a creditable win considering he began with a serious political deficit but suffered a shock defeat in his own seat. The torrential rains and floods that hit Uttarakhand in September 2021 provided a challenge and an opportunity. Dhami hit the ground running and led the rehabilitation, making sure cheques reached affected people. He has proved an effective organiser but seems to have fallen to intra-party wiles. It remains to be seen if he will be re-nominated as chief minister

**Harish Rawat** The war horse was looking for an opportunity to cement his legacy in a career where he was often overshadowed by the late ND Tiwari. His grounded, salt-of-the-earth image helped but quarrels with party managers and suspense about his own seat went against him. Memories of the scams in his previous government were also a factor and losing his seat will all but bring down the curtain over a long career that began when Uttarakhand was a part of Uttar Pradesh

Adityanath's schooling in politics came in 1996 when he managed the poll campaign for his mentor in Gorakhpur and became MP for the first time from the seat two years later at only 26 and then repeated that success five times. He was last elected MP in 2014, a post he gave up after he was handpicked by Modi to be the chief minister of UP in 2017 following BJP's landslide win. Adityanath became the first full-fledged religious leader from a Hindu mutt to take the office, an unprecedented development, with the exception of Uma Bharti's short-lived elevation to power in Bhopal.

Modi's arrival on the national scene and open embrace of all things Hindu in public had dramatically impacted the incentive to vilify Hinduism. Also, the general mindset prevailing for long in society—that the Hindu could not do the very things connected to the practice of his religion that other communities could, without feeling diffident or guilty—was radically restructured. As prime minister, Modi went on to break entrenched moulds by visiting sacred Hindu temples including in his parliamentary seat, Varanasi, in Mathura and Ayodhya, in Kedarnath and Somnath, and elsewhere. He wore vermillion forehead markers, sported saffron vestments, chanted shlokas in Sanskrit, quoted from scripture in public, and from the Bhagavad Gita. Modi was also liberal in his patronage of important places associated with the Hindu religion and its braves from history. These were images seared indelibly in the collective consciousness of the Hindu masses, stemming from the brutality of a thousand civilisational cuts inflicted by Mughal rulers like Babar and Aurangzeb and others who razed these sites of Hindu faith to build mosques. The open advocacy by Modi of their reconstruction and celebration triggered a massive boost to Hindu ethos and end to minority appeasement in politics and society. One that had normalised the mollycoddling of minority orders and institutions alike for decades by the Hindu elite, led by Jawaharlal Nehru, who appeared to want to overcompensate for India's global image of an impoverished subcontinent of rope tricks, elephants and snake charmers by persistently brushing the long traditions and cultural moorings of Hinduism under the heavy carpet of so called 'modernity'. That the Hindu elite had a big part to play in the denial of Hinduism lent it much more credibility than it otherwise would have.

Modi's bold espousal of Hinduism in public re-energised the proud assertion of the religion and conviction in it by a new generation of youth that rejected the guilt and the shame. That unapologetic owning of Hinduism in public is a playbook that Adityanath, a leader sporting saffron vestments full-time as head of the Gorakhpur mutt, has borrowed from aggressively. As a party leader put it, "For UP, they are like Partha and Sarathi; Modi is the driver of the chariot, the pathfinder, the visionary and Yogi is the warrior following his lead, delivering blows against corruption and communal mindsets and the blows for unprecedented and universal development. It's a winning combination."

The pronouncedly spiritual bent of mind that both of them share has often been credited in the case of Modi and Adityanath for a marked detachment from the trappings of power and personal acquisitions, accentuating a personal image of incorruptibility. This, especially since neither is hamstrung by the compromises and deals typical politicians make. Another unshakeable faith for both Modi and Yogi is Bharat's destiny as a Vishwa Guru. If Modi was a politician impatient for India and her cultural and spiritual legacy of centuries to take their legitimate place in the world order, Adityanath refused to be content, despite being a five-time MP, to be just one in a crowd among the BJP leadership. Both of them had an

unquenchable thirst to achieve the impossible and put India and UP at the top of the ladder of success. Modi was intent on drastically changing the longstanding perception of UP as a BIMARU state and Adityanath, the vehicle he trusted to give this a massive push.

All of these qualities invested them with a moral surplus in leadership over and above anything remotely similar in other politicians, making them both pragmatic but refusing to yield to the pressures of trade-offs in achieving key goals. These were qualities that UP's ordinary voters grew to trust implicitly and have strong faith in to transform UP radically, something that only a giant leap of faith, or two powerful giant leaps of faith, in this case, could do.

It is imperative that we talk here about the Dunning–Kruger effect, which is based on the idea that poor performers have not yet acquired the ability to distinguish between good and bad performances. Which means, they tend to overrate themselves because they do not see the qualitative difference between their performances and the performances of others. This has also been termed the "dual-burden account" since the lack of skill is paired with the ignorance of this lack.

No doubt, the Dunning–Kruger effect is relevant for various practical matters. It can lead people to make bad decisions, such as choosing a career for which they are unfit or engaging in behaviour dangerous for themselves and others due to their being unaware of lacking the necessary skills. It may also inhibit the affected from addressing their shortcomings to improve themselves. In some cases, the associated overconfidence may have positive side effects, like increasing motivation and energy.

**The performance and plight of BJP's opponents can be** analysed through this seminal theory. The election results are bad news for Akhilesh Yadav, who hoped to challenge BJP; BSP supremo Mayawati, who sought to regain a lost relevance; and for the Gandhis, looking to refurbish Congress' image as a national party with strong regional roots. Of the three hopefuls, it is Congress that has the most to despair as it was in contention in four states where it has been one of the principal poles for long and could have fancied its chances. UP was a long shot, though even a modest improvement could have been cause for some cheer. But this proved elusive. The Gandhi family bastions of Amethi-Rae Bareli are all but wiped out. The hara-kiri in Punjab, factional feuds in Uttarakhand, an obsolete leader in Manipur and desertions in Goa put paid to the party's poll effort. Though each state presents a unique set of problems, the sum of the parts points to a deeper malaise that will be hard to address in time for the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, putting a question mark against Congress' claim to be the core of any national challenge to BJP and Modi.

The electoral meltdown in Punjab has left all key players with egg on their face. Chief Minister Charanjit Singh Channi might, despite being the losing incumbent, have had

# FULFILLING AMB

## Dalits tend to benefit more than others with social

**It might be a matter of** some astonishment for Delhi-based political commentators but Dalits in India's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) are exploring unconventional political avenues beyond the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and other regional outfits. For a long time in the past, it was believed that Mayawati commanded the overwhelming support of this segment. However, with the emergence of the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP), Dalits have now become more aspirational and assertive in their democratic articulation. This is sufficiently established by the fact that BJP today has the largest number of elected representatives from the community by way of Dalit MLAs and MPs in the state.

Sadly, Delhi's intellectual elites never made an honest effort to examine conflicting realities when it came to issues and concerns of Dalits in the Hindi heartland. There are segments within this section like Jatavs, Valmikis, Khatiks, Pasis, Koli Kori, Dhobis and so on that need careful study. In the period of BSP's dominance, Jatavs among Dalits were one of the key beneficiaries owing to their numerical majority and a disproportionate presence in government and education. The other communities within the Dalit fold did not benefit much under Mayawati's regime. Therefore, to reduce the Dalit discourse in the state exclusively to the BSP story is manipulative and increasingly misleading.

Over the course of the last seven years, politics in UP has been witness to a robust socio-political churning. New-age Dalits are seeking respect, recognition and representation. The traditional idea of Bahujan politics is no longer a reality. Had it been so, the Samajwadi Party (SP) and BSP alliance would not have done as badly as it did in the 2019 General Election. To elucidate this point further, social thinker Badri Narayan in his book *Fractured Tales* observes: "I found that only a section of Dalits had the power to talk about their desires, hopes and expectations while the greater majority of the Dalit communities, although now voting for BSP, continued to live in the silent zone, as they had done for many centuries. Neither did they have any visibility in Dalit politics nor...any voice to claim the rights that BSP had provided them. Even the Dalits who could speak, although they were politically aware, were still highly marginalized socially and economically. Though the image of Dalits that is emerging in the prevailing political discourse of the country is that of a monolith, if someone studies Dalits for a long period, one will find that the Dalit subject is irretrievably heterogeneous and there exist multiple marginalities among them that are constantly being produced and reproduced."

It becomes pertinent here to understand that the Dalit discourse is constantly evolving and must not be viewed from a perspective of a political party

# EDKAR'S DREAM

**peace and stability**

By GURU PRAKASH

THE RASHTRIYA DALIT PRERNA STHAL IN NOIDA

GETTY IMAGES

or an individual.

Icons have always played a significant role in the Dalit imagination. BR Ambedkar is revered as a deity among all Dalit communities in UP as in other parts of the country. We have seen extreme violence in the past related to desecration of statues and symbols of social justice across the country. In 2016, while inaugurating a Haj house in Ghaziabad, Azam Khan, a senior SP leader, had called Ambedkar the largest land mafia of the country, saying that every statue of Ambedkar is an indication of such land occupation. Khan, a self-declared leader of the Muslim community, stuck to his remarks seen as a very condescending attitude towards Dalits. It must be noted that neither he nor his party issued a clarification or an apology with respect to that statement in the last six years. This is nothing but a reflection of the anti-Dalit mindset of SP that is a claimant to Ram Manohar Lohia's legacy. It must also be recorded that SP's national president, Akhilesh Yadav, was present on the occasion and chose to maintain a strategic silence on the ignorant and contemptuous reference to the architect of our Constitution. Surprisingly, Akhilesh, two years later in one of his articles for a national daily, said, "Our country is the largest democracy in the world and its unique constitutional framework was decided by our great founding fathers, including BR Ambedkar" ('When Ambedkar and Lohia meet', *The Indian Express*, August 18, 2018). You either take Dalits for granted or have no time for self-reflection. This hypocrisy and duality is not a given in the nature of the emerging social justice discourse being perverted by the likes of SP.

**SP's stand on reservations in** promotions is an open secret. On the floor of Parliament, the party not only opposed the policy for ensuring representation of Dalits but also had the audacity to demote lakhs of Dalits who had been promoted by the UP government. More than two lakh government employees were demoted by the SP government as per reports. In 2016, scholarships meant for the welfare of SC and ST students were also stopped on the insistence of the SP leadership.

Whatever happened in Hathras (the rape-murder case of 2020) was unfortunate and the government is committed towards delivering speedy justice to the family of the victim. Can we forget the condemnation of the United Nations of the rape and murder of two minor girls from the Dalit community in Katra Sadatganj area of Badaun? From a party wherein the patriarch makes statements in defence of heinous crimes like gangrape, what else can be expected? Addressing a huge rally in Moradabad, then SP President Mulayam Singh Yadav had said: "*Ladke hai, ladko se galti ho jati hai*". When there is institutional patronage for crime and criminals, serious offences are committed on an everyday basis. National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data suggests there is a substantial reduction in offences like kidnapping, rape and murder that used to dominate news headlines.

The biggest victims of a flailing law and order are the marginalised sections of society. Therefore, with peace and stability in society, Dalits tend to benefit relatively more than other communities. Talking of violence, can we forget the blot on our national conscience when a woman, a Dalit leader, was assaulted in the infamous guesthouse episode? For a party like SP that is anti-woman, anti-Dalit and anti-development, one cannot and must not expect delivery on the rhetorical promises made by Akhilesh Yadav.

Mayawati, with BJP's support, became the first Dalit woman to rise to the highest executive position in the constitutional scheme of governance in a significant state. Dalits of UP have been a silent witness to this transition. From making Mayawati chief minister to constructing a Panch Tirth for Ambedkar, BJP has ensured respect and representation for Dalits. It is remarkable to see the steady rise in representation of Dalits in both the party and the government. From three governors to the highest ever number of Dalits in the council of ministers to 12 key organisational positions like those of general secretary at both national and state levels.

From Saharanpur (rural), an unreserved constituency, a Dalit, Jagpal, formerly a key aide of Kanshi Ram, has contested on a BJP ticket. Similarly, from Karhal, another high-profile unreserved seat, SP Singh Baghel, an SC, has contested against Akhilesh. This is a welcome trend of fielding SC candidates in unreserved constituencies for state Assemblies and Lok Sabha. There is no binding regulation on parties to give representation to Dalits in Rajya Sabha but the recent nominations of Brij Lal (former DGP) and Kanta Kardam to the Upper House is a sign of the times to come.

I sincerely hope that this is just the beginning of a journey to realise Babasaheb Ambedkar's vision.■

*Guru Prakash teaches at Patna University. He is a BJP spokesperson*

something to talk about as he gained a profile he never had but then lost both his seats. The electorate too remained unimpressed by his elevation as the state's first 'Dalit' chief minister, and no substitute for the party's poor record in office. The would-be chief minister Navjot Singh Sidhu is even more distant from his dream than he was when, backed by the Gandhis, he launched a direct challenge to Amarinder Singh. Rather, he may rue that discussions with the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), or even schemes to float an independent front, did not fructify. The entire episode, however, puts the spotlight on a bizarre progression of events in the past year. It started with a systematic assault on the authority of then Chief Minister Amarinder Singh, long close to the party's first family. The reasons for a falling out were never clear. It could be that party bosses sensed a hitherto unreported incumbency. It is true that Singh wasn't the most energetic of administrators. But then, apart from Kerala, Punjab was the only state that returned a bunch of Congress MPs in 2019. Yet, Sidhu presented himself as a 'change agent' the party needed, winning the backing of Priyanka and Rahul Gandhi. His maverick ways may have made less of an impression on Sonia Gandhi, but decision-making is now primarily in the hands of her children, more so with Rahul. The track Sidhu chose to challenge Amarinder was to rake up the 'sacrilege' case involving alleged acts of desecration that happened when SAD-BJP were in office in 2015 but which were also investigated after Amarinder became chief minister. The quashing of the SIT report on the incidents by the Punjab and Haryana High Court provided Siddhu with ammunition to take on his rival. It was a risky manoeuvre, laden with emotive overtones that could inflame public opinion, but had the backing of the leadership. Not one to shy away from a fight, Amarinder hit back, labelling Sidhu a national security risk for his proximity to Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan and army chief General Qamar Bajwa.

Till this time, Singh was faithfully towing the leadership line, encouraging the agitation against the three rescinded farm laws—powered mainly by Punjab-based farm unions—egging on farmers to lay siege to Delhi in order to pressure the Modi government. The farm laws had also ruptured the Akali-BJP alliance, depleting the challenge to Congress. And while the Centre was under adverse notice, the Akalis failed to make any gains despite their leverage with 'panthic' organisations lending muscle to the farm stir. But soon enough, the picture changed. Supported by AICC, Sidhu escalated his row with Amarinder and Congress infighting became the main locus of politics as governance predictably took a backseat. When Amarinder was finally yanked off the chief minister's chair, things became even messier, as the serving chief minister was in the dark about a meeting of the legislative summoned to oust him. If all this smacked of vendetta against the party veteran, the decision to overlook Sidhu for the chief minister's post only made matters worse. If the reason was Amarinder would not countenance a direct rival being elevated, no purpose was served as the veteran soon left the party and later allied with BJP. Moreover, Channi was an uninspiring choice while his Dalit credentials were untested as a poll factor. Party insiders feel Amarinder's assertive ways and his streak of individuality just did not go down well with the high command. In contrast to the ugly scenes in Chandigarh, BJP's decision to replace a tall leader like BS Yediyurappa in Karnataka and the entire cabinet, including Chief Minister Vijay Rupani, in Gujarat, was carried out with skill and little fuss. Though being in office at the Centre gave Modi and Amit Shah the heft to carry out difficult changes, the process nonetheless stood in contrast to l'affair Amarinder. To cap it all, Channi's elevation failed to end the bloodletting, with Sidhu making it clear that he had only paused his ambitions

**Pramod Sawant** Managing Goa's treacherous politics post-Manohar Parrikar was no mean job and the ayurveda doctor not only survived but led BJP back to office. In a game where emerging 'single largest' is the objective, Sawant has exceeded the target. With age on his side, he now stands to get the better of stalwarts from his own party and the opposition, as BJP's experiment, initiated by Parrikar, of fielding Catholics proves durable as an election strategy in the state

The sub-optimal results are only likely to further delay the organisational polls, including the election of a full-time party president and constitution of a working committee, demanded by the G-23 dissenters. Earlier, the Covid situation was offered as a reason, but even now the ruling faction will carefully weigh the fallout of organising a party jamboree like an AICC session at a time of political flux. Will Congress introspect and change its tactics? The ranks of dissenters are likely to swell and become more vocal but prospects of a course-correction are dim. Despite repeated advice that personalised attacks on Modi do not work and can be counterproductive, Rahul Gandhi has not altered his views, convinced he needs to confront the BJP mascot head-on. His recent formulations on 'Hinduism', 'Hindutva' and 'Hindutvawadi' have puzzled senior Congress leaders, one of whom pointed out that venturing into such territory requires a thorough reading of the subjects, including the Supreme Court's ruling on Hindutva and related issues. The sweeping attack on the government on all fronts, ranging from the policy on China to evacuation of students from Ukraine to alleged economic distress, finds a ready echo with ideological opponents of Modi-BJP, but this might be a case of preaching to the converted, fear Congress leaders worried at the party's downward trajectory. Living in a political bubble reinforced by tuning into an echo chamber that supports its bias, prevents the leadership from undertaking an accurate analysis of its diminishing electoral clout. The belief that 'institutional capture' by BJP-RSS and 'polarisation' has unfairly skewed the electoral field in favour of the ruling dispensation—an important aspect of Rahul Gandhi's letter resigning as party president after the 2019 Lok Sabha results—is in sync with

**Biren Singh** The affable Manipuri has broken new ground for BJP in the Northeast, shunting Congress out of its one-time bastion where Ibobi Singh had ruled the roost for long. Though most northeastern states account for no more than one or two Lok Sabha seats each, they add up to a handy 25 (including Assam's 14) and have been a focus area for BJP and its main man in the region, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma. Singh can now focus on improving on gains made in curbing insurgency and violence

the 'democracy deficit' narrative espoused by BJP's critics and opponents but fails to inspire a wider following.

The more immediate question is about Congress' prospects in the next General Election about two years away. Some of the key contests along the way—Himachal Pradesh and Gujarat later this year—and Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Karnataka and Rajasthan in 2023—are essentially BJP versus Congress contests. The current state of the party raises questions whether it can take on the BJP election machine by identifying weak spots in the saffron armour and sufficiently exploit them in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls. The official camp in the party feels that the national election is a different ball game and Congress remains the only real alternative with the experience and leaders capable of running a Central government. But there is recognition that regional parties will give no quarter in the leadership stakes as was seen in the Goa election where NCP-Shiv Sena and Trinamool (with local party MGP) contested separately. The Punjab blunder has hardly bolstered confidence levels in Congress as the spectacle of Amarinder Singh's undignified ouster and Sidhu's antics only deepened public disenchantment with the party and government. In retrospect, AAP's Punjab win may be put down as a gift from Congress, as popular distrust with traditional choices opened the doors to an intrepid interloper. Looking ahead, given the family-centric nature of Congress' functioning, it is unlikely that a leadership challenge will succeed. Regional satraps like the chief ministers of Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, Ashok Gehlot and Bhupesh Baghel, may get more leeway while the leadership's capacity to intermediate and negotiate factional claims declines. After the 2019 defeat, Rahul Gandhi accused party seniors of being lukewarm about attacking BJP over alleged graft in the Rafale deal rather than considering that the campaign may have been off the mark. As things stand, Congress seems intent on doing more of the same as evidenced by Rahul Gandhi getting Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh to revert to the old pension schemes in what is seen as a rejection of BJP policies even though the new scheme prevailed throughout the United Progressive Alliance's (UPA) 2004-14 tenure.

In the aftermath of the UP result, both SP and BSP find themselves back at the drawing board, but Mayawati may find herself in a tighter spot. The Dalit outfit was squeezed between BJP and SP, with the perception that the latter has better prospects persuading Muslim voters to ditch BSP. In the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, the SP and BSP alliance could not stop BJP but Mayawati's party won 10 seats against SP's five. There is no such consolation this time round. BSP's majority in the 2007 state polls was powered by upper castes moving away from BJP as the party did not appear a contender and forwards saw Mayawati as preferable to Mulayam Singh. BSP has since not been able to replicate the magic, even though Mayawati campaigned actively before rival SP began its outreach. The salience of Modi and Yogi Adityanath ensured that not only BJP's traditional base remained loyal but there was an accretion at the expense of BSP's Dalit votes too. This creates an existential threat for the party that has crucially depended on leveraging the Dalit base with the caste-community of a particular candidate it puts up. Adityanath's "Hindutva Plus" model that incorporates a heavy dose of welfarism poses a stiff challenge even as the perception that BSP is better at law and order than SP is eroded by the chief minister's pro-active approach to fighting crime.

The shift in the Muslim vote, along with some addition by way of RLD and Rajbhar alliances, as also the race turning largely bipolar, saw SP's vote jump to 32 per cent but it also hit a ceiling. SP's seats have more than doubled, but it failed to cross a critical threshold, and a 10-11 per cent vote gap with BJP presents impossible odds. The silver lining is that SP will be seen as the alternative to BJP with Akhilesh Yadav a likely leader of opposition, a better outcome than BSP that has been swept aside. But like BSP, SP also faces the fading appeal of its caste-driven mobilisation and patronage architecture when in office. With BJP's umbrella coalition of upper castes, non-Yadav OBCs and sections of Dalits proving durable over four elections, there might be some re-think in the SP base as well. The Muslim vote may not yet reconsider its antipathy towards BJP, but the utility of minority politics, as practised by 'secular' parties, is certainly under the scanner. SP has long supported local strongmen and facilitators who became the intermediary between the party and Muslim voters. But whether the immunity from law enforcement enjoyed by such leaders when SP is in office actually helps the wider minority community or only encourages a dependence on mafias, could become a point of discussion. Not only do these tactics trigger a counter-polarisation, and actually increase communal tension, the supplicant-master relationship is essentially unequal and exploitative.

This round of elections, seen as a semi-final to 2024, especially in UP, has resulted in an unambiguous message that leaders like Yogi Adityanath, pursuing their goals at a frenetic pace and with no sense of foreboding, will give no quarter to slow-footed rivals. Jubilant BJP leaders, therefore, cannot be faulted for saying that the people of four of the five states that went to the polls have hung many of their contenders out to dry.■

*Also read:* The Yogi Law *by Virendra Nath Bhatt at* openthemagazine.com

# CREATING A STAKEHOLDER ECONOMY

## DEVELOPMENT AND ACCESS TO BASIC AMENITIES ARE MOVING VOTERS AWAY FROM THE TRADITIONAL DRAW OF CASTE AND RELIGION IN INDIA'S MOST POLITICALLY SIGNIFICANT STATE

By ANIL PADMANABHAN

**Normally, the contentious elections to the** Uttar Pradesh (UP) Assembly are influenced by the faultlines of religion and caste. For the first time, the sense one gets from various ground reports is that there may be a third factor: change in voting preferences of beneficiaries or the *labarthis* of the visibly improved law and order in the state as well as the recipients of the various social welfare programmes like housing, drinking water, cooking gas, electricity and toilets that have been rolled out on a war footing in the last five to seven years at the national and state levels.

Both Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath have made it a point to allude to this in every stump speech during the election campaign. The showcasing of a checklist of the government's various achievements is intended as much to blunt anti-incumbency as to also create a new cohort of voters. Especially since the gains from this socio-economic trading accruing from improved governance are not necessarily tangible. Worse, the assessment is always subjective and depends on the peculiar circumstance of every household.

It is another matter that the historical neglect in providing these basic amenities has not denied other less committed regimes electoral victory in the past. This election was therefore a test for a new electoral experiment in Indian politics.

Indeed, Modi-Yogi's success in their messaging, and harvesting of this social capital to pull off a record second win, probably sets in motion another round of rewriting of voter behaviour in UP. The ripple effect of this would, at least, force another political reset. Especially since the bulk of the beneficiaries of these social welfare programmes as well as improved law and order are the cohort of women—who are rapidly emerging as a key electoral constituency.

### WINDS OF CHANGE

**No election, especially those to an Assembly, are ever won** or lost because of one single reason. Often, it is a combination of factors, including the composition of the opposition and number of rivals, the political allegiance and so on. Yet every state election has a standard set of necessary conditions—though they are not sufficient to guarantee victory. In the case of UP, this has long been caste and religion.

However, in the last seven years since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) notched up an audacious win in the General Election in 2014 and did an encore in 2019, there has been a serious effort to challenge this stereotype.

The hint of change was signalled by Prime Minister Modi in his first Independence Day address in 2014 when he committed that the nation would end open defecation within four years.

"We are in the 21st century and yet there is still no dignity for women as they must go out in the open to defecate and have to wait for darkness to fall. Can you imagine the number of problems they have to face because of this?" he had asked in his national address, before adding, "People may criticise me for talking about toilets from the Red Fort. But I am from a poor family; I have seen poverty firsthand. For the poor to get dignity, it must start from here."

Deftly, the prime minister had flagged a serious development deficit and tagged its urgent resolution with restoring the dignity of the poor, especially women.

Drawing inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi, who had spearheaded India's independence movement, he had added, "When we celebrate the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi next year (2015), then millions of our *Swachhagrahis* will pay tribute to honourable Bapu, in the form of a Swachh Bharat."

In 2014, open defecation in India was estimated at 600

Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

## THE RISE OF THE BENEFICIARY-STAKEHOLDER

**HOUSING SCHEME**

PM AWAS YOJANA
**43.5 LAKH**
RURAL BENEFICIARIES

CM AWAS YOJANA
**1.08 LAKH**
RURAL BENEFICIARIES

**DRINKING WATER**

RURAL HOUSEHOLDS WITH TAP CONNECTION
2019 **5.16 LAKH**
2022 **35.26 LAKH**

**ELECTRICITY ACCESS**

RURAL HOUSEHOLDS
2017 **1 CRORE**
2022 **2.93 CRORE**
(1,04,636 revenue villages electrified)

**LPG ACCESS**

(ALL-INDIA) HOUSEHOLDS
2016 **62%**
2022 **99.80%**

**KISAN SAMMAN NIDHI**

**2.56 CRORE**
BENEFICIARIES

**TOILETS CONSTRUCTED**

**2.6 CRORE**

million. Nearly three of five people in India did not have toilets. Five years later, every household was enabled access to a toilet in their home—resulting in the building of 110 million toilets.

The experience with cooking gas followed a similar pattern. In 2014, just about one in two households used cooking gas. Most depended on locally procured sources of fuel like firewood or kerosene—both a health hazard when used in the confines of a kitchen. As Modi pointed out in his Independence Day address, the brunt of this glaring deficit in basic amenities, too, is borne by women. In 2014, little over one in two households used cooking gas. Five years later, almost every household was brought on the cooking gas grid.

### DRINKING WATER

**Undoubtedly the biggest public policy failure of the first 75** years of modern India is its failure to provide universal access to tap water. Prior to the launch of the Har Ghar Jal or water mission in 2019, access to tap water was available to only 3.12 crore rural households in the country—there are an estimated 19.19 crore rural households in India.

The story in urban India is no better. Yes more people may be accessing tap water, but only one city in India, Puri in Odisha, provides it 24x7 to all households. And even this milestone was logged only a year ago.

In short, access to basic service drinking water is a luxury. Not only does this deny people a basic standard of living and exposes them to a host of diseases from consuming contaminated water, it also hurts the productivity of the economy. Addressing this nationwide deficit, therefore, has been the biggest takeaway of NDA in its second tenure.

In the case of UP, the proportion of households with access to tap water was among the lowest in the country. In 2019, when the Har Ghar Jal mission was launched, only 1.95 per cent households in rural UP had access to tap water.

And this carries serious consequences, not just for the most populous state but for the entire country. In a tweet, Dr Sujay Shad, a New Delhi-based surgeon, detailed the impact in none too subtle terms: "Young men in some Bundelkhand villages can't get brides because of perpetual water shortages. Women trudge long distances for water, leading to knee, hip, spinal deformities, and arthritis. (There is an) Epidemic prevalence of uterine and rectal prolapse in these regions."

A national study conducted recently by the Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR) only confirmed these fears. It found that one in 10 deaths of children under the age of five in India occurred because of diarrhoea. Inevitably, the poorer you are it is only logical to expect that you have less access to safe drinking water. Not surprising then that the odds are stacked against children born in poverty.

In the three years since the mission was launched, the number of rural households with tap water connections in UP improved seven-fold from 5.16 lakh to 35.26 lakh. The mission's objectives are far from realised, yet it is still off to a good start.

Once again, as in the case of toilets, access to piped water could potentially turn out to be one of the most essential elements contributing to empowerment at the household level, especially for women. In the 2017 face-off for the UP Assembly elections, the provision of cooking gas had worked electoral wonders for BJP. It is therefore only fair to expect these women to respond similarly this time round too.

Academic research endorses the claim that universal access to electricity, cooking gas and tap water accelerates the empowerment of women.

In a conversation on the 'Ideas for India' podcast, Ashish K Sedai, a PhD candidate at Colorado State University, drawing from his research paper on water, electricity and female labour force participation, said, "I do believe that the issue of livelihoods in terms of not only access to drinking water but access to say television or electricity is critical in solving household issues from within."

What access to these services does is significantly improve the likelihood of women's employment and their health outcomes. Not to speak of the drudgery of daily life they will be spared.

### CONNECTING UTTAR PRADESH

**An outstanding feature of NDA, in its first and second tenures,** is the remarkable energy it has brought to road-building. Guided by Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari, it picked up pace from around 12 km per day in 2013-14 to 28 km in 2019-20. More recently, this pace accelerated to an impressive 36 km a day in 2019-20.

Source: Union government and state government of Uttar Pradesh

**MUDRA LOANS FOR SMALL/ MICRO UNITS**
1.39 CRORE
BENEFICIARIES

**PM LIFE INSURANCE**
(PMJJBY)
2.38 CRORE
BENEFICIARIES

**PM GARIB KALYAN**
₹4,800 CRORE
spent on delivering ration twice a month to 15 crore recipients

**PER CAPITA INCOME**
ROSE FROM
₹46,000 in 2016
to ₹94,000

**LAW AND ORDER**
Crimes (Per 1 lakh population)
MURDER
2017 1.9 | 2020 1.7
RAPE
2017 4.0 | 2020 2.5
KIDNAPPING
2017 8.9 | 2020 5.6

**POLICE RECRUITMENT**
2017 STALLED
2020 1,43,000
WOMEN POLICE RECRUITMENT
FRESH RECRUITMENT
2020 20,234
(3 women battalions raised)

In UP, the Union government found a partner who matched its stride as it were in road-building. The state government launched the construction of three major expressways with a combined length of 1,232 km and a minimum of four lanes. Alongside, it has also initiated construction of state-link expressways connecting Prayagraj, Gorakhpur, Jhansi and Ayodhya-Poorvanchal. Once completed, these will complement the four national expressways—Delhi-Meerut, Eastern Peripheral, Kanpur-Lucknow and Lucknow Outer Ring Road—to provide unprecedented connectivity in India's most populous state.

One potential collateral gain from this enhanced connectivity is the force-multiplier effect on commerce and thereby development activity in the state.

## EMPOWERMENT VS ENTITLEMENT

**The ideology driving the effort to** bridge these development deficits has been drawn from NDA's preference for empowerment to entitlement. In contrast to the previous regime, the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA), NDA has opted for the strategy of teaching people how to fish.

And in this, the NDA playbook entailed providing universal access to basic services like electricity, drinking water, housing, financial services and personal security.

NDA also accelerated the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) scheme it had inherited from UPA. It identified the beneficiaries by linking their Jan Dhan bank account, mobile phone and Aadhaar and thereby ensured money was transferred directly to the bank account. The gain from this disintermediation was the dent it caused to corruption—yet again something that leads to empowerment. At the end of March 2020, the savings on account of DBT to the exchequer was ₹1.7 trillion—which was the size of the first Covid-19 relief package.

Similarly, in UP, the BJP government has in the last five years provided electricity to 1.8 crore households, 1.9 LPG connections and built 2.6 crore homes for the poor.

The fallout of Covid-19, which had dodgy origins in Wuhan, China, led to widespread economic pain. As a first line of defence, the economy had to be shut down for several months causing widespread layoffs. The worst affected were the poor and the scores of migrants forced to return home to UP. To mitigate this fallout, the Union government has bankrolled the world's largest social relief exercise of supplying five kilograms of free foodgrains for 80 crore people. In UP, the 15 crore beneficiaries also received edible oil, dal and salt in their package.

It is clear then that the scale of material trading-up attempted in the country in general and poll-bound UP in particular is unprecedented. What this has done is to stoke the creation of a stakeholder economy. Instead of being perennially left out—and promised the carrot in every election cycle—scores of new beneficiaries of social welfare and those accessing basic material needs like electricity, drinking water and healthcare have been added.

Instead of being outside looking in, there are more people than ever before who are now inside looking out. The big question is whether the voter behaviour of these stakeholders will change for good—by prioritising the trading-up over the conventional draw of caste and religion.■

### CONNECTING UTTAR PRADESH

State Expressways

| EXPRESSWAY | KILOMETRES | LANES |
|---|---|---|
| Ganga | 600 | FOUR |
| Poorvanchal | 343 | SIX |
| Bundelkhand | 289 | FOUR |

State Link Expressways

| LINK | KILOMETRES | LANES |
|---|---|---|
| Prayagraj | 150 | FOUR |
| Gorakhpur | 89 | FOUR |
| Jhansi | 92 | FOUR |
| Ayodhya-Poorvanchal | 20 | FOUR |

National Expressways

| EXPRESSWAY | KILOMETRES | LANES |
|---|---|---|
| Delhi-Meerut | 96 | FOURTEEN |
| Lucknow Outer Ring Road | 94 | FOUR |
| Eastern Peripheral | 135 | SIX |
| Kanpur-Lucknow | 80 | FOURTEEN |

Source: Union government and state government of Uttar Pradesh

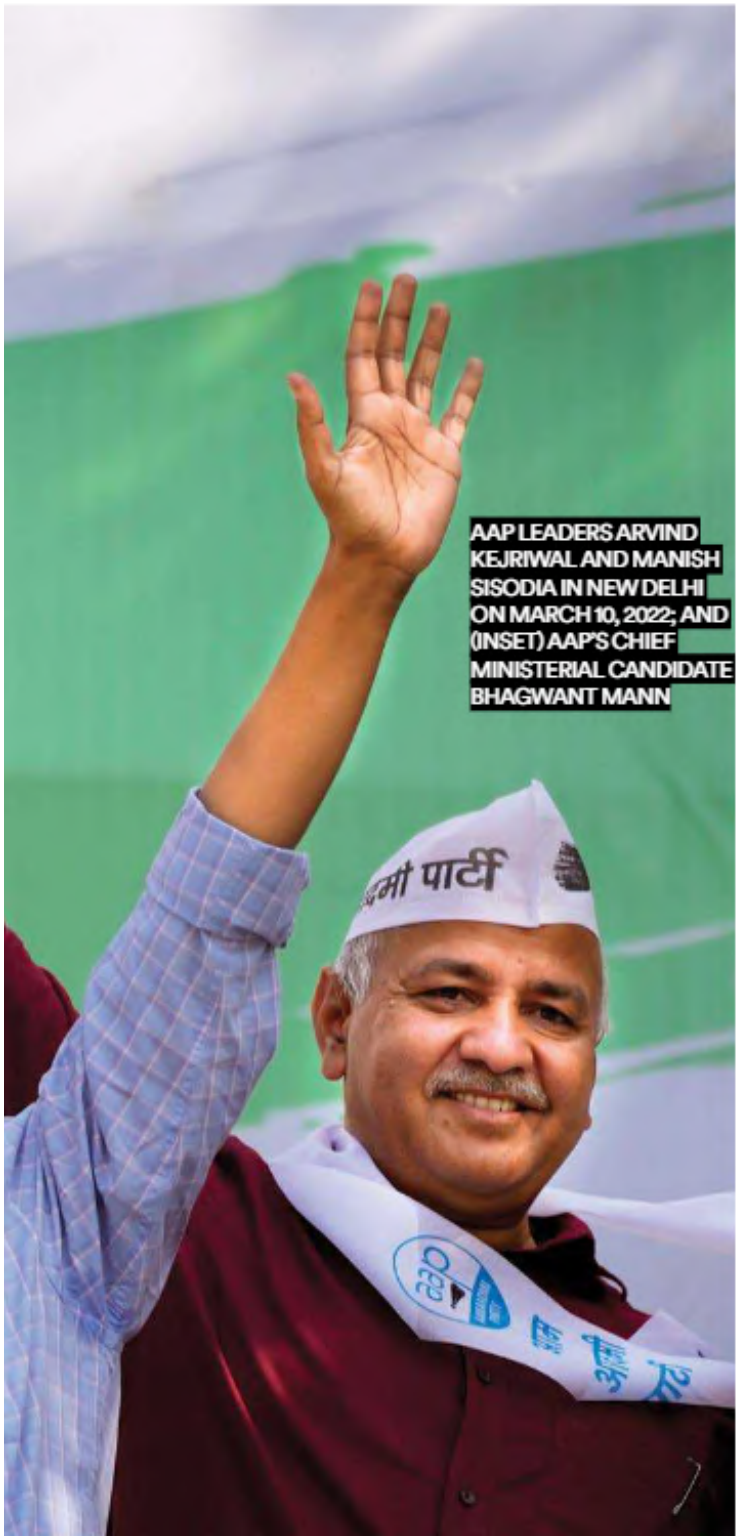
*Anil Padmanabhan is a Delhi-based journalist who writes on the intersection of politics and economics in his weekly column 'Capital Calculus'*

V22 PREDICT

PUNJAB

# AAP decimated Congress and SAD populism, changing the political

# with a more attractive model of map of a traditional two-party state



AAP LEADERS ARVIND KEJRIWAL AND MANISH SISODIA IN NEW DELHI ON MARCH 10, 2022; AND (INSET) AAP'S CHIEF MINISTERIAL CANDIDATE BHAGWANT MANN

AP

By SIDDHARTH SINGH

**The Aam Aadmi Party's (AAP) emphatic victory has** upset all political equations in Punjab that was until now a classic two-party state. The massive score chalked up by AAP across the state, but especially in the Malwa region, clearly indicates the electorate's disenchantment with Congress and the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD). These parties were not just reduced but decimated in what was a one-sided contest.

In the whirlwind sweeping Punjab, a number of giants have been felled. Parkash Singh Badal—10-time winner from his home turf Lambi—lost. In Jalalabad, his son and top Akali leader, Sukhbir Singh Badal was trounced. Congress, too, had its share of fallen giants. In Bhadaur and his home seat Chamkaur Sahib, Chief Minister Charanjit Singh Channi was defeated. In Amritsar East, Pradesh Congress Committee chief Navjot Singh Sidhu was defeated. In Patiala—his pocket borough—former Chief Minister Amarinder Singh was defeated. These are not ordinary results: the state's existing leadership cutting across party lines has been, to use an indelicate expression, politically beheaded.

At the heart of AAP's stupendous victory lay its 'Malwa Strategy': the party's sustained focus on this seat-rich part of Punjab clicked finally. If one looks at the total seats the party won, Malwa alone accounts for a bulk of them. Unlike 2017 when the party won precious few seats outside Malwa, this time AAP's footprint is pan-Punjab and includes major wins in Doaba and Majha. These regions are now integral to its political calculations. Back in 2017, the party won a significant 18 seats in the Malwa region that had long been considered an SAD fortress. While that number was nowhere near the mark needed to reach the secretariat in Chandigarh, it was nothing short of a tectonic shift in Punjab's politics.

Come 2022, the same strategy has paid off dramatically. AAP has vacuum-cleaned the state, winning an overwhelming majority of the 69 seats in Malwa. Congress, which had won 40 of the 69 seats, has been trounced. And in what marks a historic political shift, SAD has been decimated in what was once considered its home turf. It is worth noting that since the time SAD emerged as a political formation in Punjab, it has never performed as poorly as it has now. The once dominant political force in the state has been reduced to a single-digit existence.

What explains AAP's sweep? Malwa is the agrarian heart of Punjab, accounting for the bulk of crop output. It is also the centre of populist expectations from any government. Over the past two

decades, every government in Punjab has indulged in economic populism but its impact has been disproportionate in Malwa. Free electricity, ever-rising Minimum Support Prices (MSPs), and more have created a surge of populist expectations from voters in the region. In its 2022 campaign, AAP promised a slew of sops and freebies to the electorate overall in Punjab but the message homed in successfully in Malwa.

The farmers' agitation—that was centred in Malwa—led to these demands being pitched even higher. By the end of the agitation, it was not just maintaining the current system of food procurement but even amendments to the Electricity Act and 'legalising' MSP that became the core of farmers' demands. These demands were not conceded but the populist pitch created fed

AAP SUPPORTERS IN AMRITSAR ON MARCH 10, 2022

AP

AT THE HEART OF AAP'S VICTORY LAY ITS 'MALWA STRATEGY': THE PARTY'S SUSTAINED FOCUS ON THIS SEAT-RICH PART OF PUNJAB CLICKED FINALLY. UNLIKE 2017 WHEN IT WON PRECIOUS FEW SEATS OUTSIDE MALWA. THIS TIME AAP'S FOOTPRINT IS PAN-PUNJAB

into the political momentum ultimately harvested by AAP.

AAP's gains in Malwa are almost a mirror image of Congress' losses in this region. In 2017, Congress won 40 seats but this time it has been practically wiped out. The exit from Congress has fed directly into AAP's kitty.

What made matters worse for Congress was its inability to set its house in order well in time before the elections. In the last two years, the anti-incumbent sentiment had been building steadily against the Amarinder Singh government. The party's high command acted against Singh only after there was an open rebellion against his leadership. Even then, the party took small steps to craft a new leadership. Worse, the infighting between the top leaders—Channi and Sidhu—did not abate right up to the point when Channi was announced as the chief ministerial candidate, barely a fortnight before polling. By then, the damage had been done.

Channi as the chief ministerial face was supposed to work wonders for Congress. An experienced leader who is a Dalit was expected to wipe clean the slate of the electorate's past disappointments. Channi chose not to press hard on the issue of sacrilege that had led to anger against the Amarinder Singh government. At the same time, a Dalit as chief minister was expected to help the party shore up support in Doaba, a region where the Dalit vote is concentrated. That did not help Congress make the gains it had expected in the region which accounts for 23 of the 117 Assembly seats. This step did very little to lift the party's fortunes in Malwa. If anything, it is a matter of debate whether his projection as the chief ministerial face actually damaged Congress' prospects in the politically dominant region.

The earlier assessments of multi-cornered contests across the state leading to narrow victory margins have proven wrong. The Sanyukt Samaj Morcha (SSN)—the party forged by agitating farmers and their leaders—was expected to hold some sway even if the formation was not expected to win many seats. It did neither.

The election results have also put a question mark against SAD whose vote share has gone down: from 33.2 per cent it has fallen by almost half in 2022. Its seats tally has consequently been reduced drastically: from 18 seats to just three. SAD's rout on its home turf, Malwa, where its core constituency of Jat farmers is concentrated, shows the party has lost traction badly. This is not something that has happened overnight, but steadily since 2012. SAD has performed badly across all regions. It was, traditionally, not a dominant party in Doaba but had a degree of support in Majha where the religious or 'panthic' vote was a mainstay of its support. This time, even that has gone. There is now a big question about SAD's future prospects in a two-party system whose poles are AAP and Congress. SAD has been edged out.

Punjab has experienced a tectonic political shift. Its two mainstream parties, Congress and SAD have been edged out by an 'outside' political formation, an event rarely seen in any Indian state. But the road to this stage was prepared by Congress and SAD. At one time, these parties sought to outbid each other on the basis of wooing the 'panthic' or religious vote. In the three decades since the end of terrorism in Punjab, these parties reinvented the political wheel and sought influence by taking Punjab ever deeper into economic populism. The 'outside' force finally walked in with a more attractive variant of populism.■

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PUSHKAR SINGH DHAMI

# Modi's personal touch and women voters played a crucial role in BJP's victory

By AMITA SHAH

When Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami gave the slogan "*Abki baar 60 paar*! This time, we will cross 60," it had raised eyebrows, amid doubts whether his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will even make it to the magic figure.

In five years, BJP changed two chief ministers—Trivendra Singh Rawat and Tirath Singh Rawat—giving charge to Dhami just eight months before the state Assembly election.

The odds had appeared to be against BJP, in a state which had elected Congress and BJP alternately in every state election in the 21 years of its existence. BJP, which had swept the state with 57 of the 70 seats in 2017, faced anti-incumbency, allegations of patronising illegal mining, laments of unemployment and accusations of 'mismanaging' Covid during the second wave. The stage was set for Congress to cash in on BJP's predicament.

But Congress, typically lukewarm to the need of the hour, underestimated BJP's ability to pick up the pieces—strengthening its organisational machinery from the ground level, consolidating its vote banks and playing its trump card, Prime Minister Narendra Modi. For the first time in the history of Uttarakhand, a party has

returned to power for a second consecutive term.

A month after Dhami was sworn in, Modi interacted with women making biscuits at a Rudrapur bakery, lauding their success. On Republic Day, as he paid tributes to martyrs at the National War Memorial in the capital, Modi was seen wearing an Uttarakhandi cap. He held five rallies in the state, speaking a few words of Garhwali in Garhwal and Kumaoni in Kumaon, balancing his outreach to the two regions of the state. It had become clear that Congress was pitted in a direct face-off with Modi.

Political analysts also say, women voters, who outnumbered men by 4.6 per cent in Uttarakhand, played a crucial role in BJP's victory. "There's a lot of support for Modi among women. During the lockdown, the Modi government started giving free ration. He connects directly with people at rallies, speaking a few lines of the local language," says MM Semwal, head, Department of Political Science, HNB Garhwal Central University, in Garhwal's Srinagar.

BJP swept the state for an unprecedented second term, even as its vote share fell marginally. Interestingly, Dhami lost to Congress' Bhuwan Chandra Kapri on his turf Khatima and Harish Rawat lost to BJP's Mohan Singh Bisht in Lalkuan.

BJP had launched an aggressive campaign against Congress, accusing Rawat of corruption, sharpening its tirade as the polling day neared. For Congress, which was reluctant to openly declare Rawat, still the party's most popular leader in the state, as its chief ministerial candidate, it would mean nurturing a new leadership in the state.

**The state had started slipping from Congress' hands** after the 2002 Assembly election, when it won 36 seats under ND Tiwari. BJP won the 2007 election with 35 seats, and in 2012, Congress made it to power on a slender margin with 32 seats, one seat more than BJP. In 2017, BJP swept the state with 57 seats, setting a record, leaving Congress with just 11. BJP saw its vote share rise from 33 per cent in 2012 to 46.5 per cent, though Congress' fell only marginally to 33.5 per cent from 33.79 per cent. This year, even before the election results were out, the turf war for the chief minister's post had already begun in Congress. The calculations went awry for Congress, which was banking on the state adhering to the trend of alternate governments, anti-incumbency against BJP and its promises on employment, health facilities and education.

The disillusionment with BJP chief ministers notwithstanding, Modi's popularity had not waned. It dominated the party's campaign, eclipsing state leaders. Union Home Minister Amit Shah repeatedly said at rallies that if former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee created Uttarakhand, Narendra Modi will build it. On the Uttarakhand campaign trail, BJP leaders have consistently evoked Vajpayee, in whose regime Uttarakhand was carved out of Uttar Pradesh and turned into a separate state in 2000. They recall the past, reminding people of the 1994 Rampur Tiraha police firing on activists demanding a separate state, when Samajwadi Party leader Mulayam Singh Yadav was chief minister of undivided UP.

It is the present, more than the past, that gave BJP an edge. As the state went through the Covid lockdown, besides natural calamities, the Central government sent villagers free ration—5 kg of rice and 7 kg of wheat—for each person. Modi, at his rallies, spoke of the future of the state, promising to address unfulfilled bread-and-butter commitments made to the state in 2000, powered by BJP's "double-engine *ki sarkar*", with the party in power in the state and at the Centre. He launched developmental projects in Garhwal's Dehradun and in Kumaon's Haldwani. The projects included stretches of the Char Dham all-weather road, which has been widened. At Kedarnath, which Modi has visited several times, he said the next decade will belong to Uttarakhand.

"Modi's popularity, particularly among women and the elderly, the faith in the double-engine *ki sarkar* and the public acceptance of Dhami helped the BJP," says Anoop Nautiyal, founder of the Dehradun-based Social Development for Communities (SDC) Foundation, engaged in issues related to development of Uttarakhand.

Within four months of taking charge, Dhami claimed that his government took nearly 400 decisions benefiting the common man. The state government went on an overdrive. The old-age pension was raised from ₹1,200 to ₹1,400; children studying in Classes 10 and 12 received ₹12,000 in their bank accounts through the direct benefit transfer (DBT) scheme to buy tablets. Dhami promised uniform civil code and strict laws against love jihad. BJP's mantra was lucid—a fusion of development and Hindutva!

Congress, taking a leaf out of BJP's campaign, brought an element of religion into its own, even as it focused on bread-and-butter issues and reviving "*Uttarakhandiyat*/the culture of Uttarakhand." It gave the slogan "*Uttarakhand Swabhiman—Char Dham, Char Kaam*," with four promises—keeping LPG cylinders below ₹500, helping five lakh families annually with ₹40,000, four lakh jobs over the next five years and health facilities for every family in the state.

"This election was based on personality politics. While BJP has a strong leadership at the Centre, Congress has a mass leader in Harish Rawat. But Congress neither projected him as chief ministerial candidate, nor was able to cash in on the anger against BJP," says Semwal. With Modi taking the reins, 46-year-old Dhami being projected as chief ministerial face, Congress battling feuds within and his party rebels working against him, the septuagenarian's battle was an uphill one. His was a lone fight, as people of the state would say "What can Harda do alone?"

Dhami was the 11th chief minister of Uttarakhand. A week is a long time in politics. Eight months are an era. The people have apparently put behind their disillusionment over the frequent changes in chief ministership. Trivendra Singh Rawat, who was chief minister for four years, had apparently earned the ire of the priests of the Char Dham shrines over his government's decision to form the Char Dham Devasthanam Management Board to control the four shrines of Gangotri, Yamunotri, Badrinath and Kedarnath, and temples affiliated to them. Within four months of taking charge, Dhami withdrew the Act.

With infighting in both Congress and BJP hindering stability in state politics, no chief minister, barring ND Tiwari (2002-07), has lasted a full term in the state. Can BJP buck yet another trend?■

# The decline in Congress votes smaller parties gave BJP the

By RAJEEV DESHPANDE

**As counting gained pace and numbers began to** stack up for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the party turned the page on the legacy of Manohar Parrikar, both embellishing it and recasting it with a new leader in Chief Minister Pramod Sawant, set to renew his stint in the office he took over from the late saffron stalwart in March 2019. Inching towards a majority, BJP will not have to sweat it out to cobble up the numbers, with smaller parties and independents notching up a few seats.

The big difference of seats between BJP and Congress in a House of 40 is what knocked the challenger out of contention. Congress-Goa Forward Party looked likely to win 12 seats, considerably behind BJP, and way short of the halfway mark. The other alliance of Trinamool Congress and Maharashtrawadi Gomantak Party (MGP) looked set to win a couple of seats, all for MGP. Put together, Congress, MGP, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), and the Goa Forward Party (GFP) still ended up behind BJP without enough seats to form a government. With the focus on post-poll deals and alliances, BJP was not likely to allow a small deficit to prevent it from forming the government again in the state. The Nationalist Congress Party-Shiv Sena alliance drew a blank as three independents and a lone member of the Revolutionary Goans Party, expected to win their seats, presented a few more post-poll options.

The vote shares told the story of the Goa election, with BJP logging in 33 per cent to Congress' 23 per cent, with "others" bringing up the third largest chunk of 19 per cent votes. BJP fought on 40 seats and Congress on 37, having left three for GFP. Both Congress and its ally underperformed. NCP and Sena contested 13 and eight seats, respectively, and to their consternation, did not bother the scorer. In 2017, BJP with a near similar vote share had won just 13 seats while Congress with 28 per cent of the vote, got 17 seats, only to lose the trophy to some adroit post-poll footwork by BJP leader Nitin Gadkari who stitched a coalition while a leaden-footed Congress lost the plot. The decline in Congress votes and the role of smaller parties have given BJP the winning advantage this time round with the saffron outfit fielding a shrewd mix of Hindu and Catholic candidates. It was a formula worked out by Parrikar who led BJP and allies to a rare majority in the 2012 Assembly election. Thereafter, the formulation yielded mixed results but BJP's decision to induct several Catholic MLAs from Congress during its just-concluded term, though intended essentially to demoralise the rival, also revived the idea. Important Catholic leaders like Atanasio Monserrate and Mauvin Godinho have won on BJP tickets from Panaji and Dabolim.

The small state, known for its alluring beaches and tourism avenues, presents a larger picture in terms of the political message of the election. For one, BJP under Sawant is headed for a stable five-year term as the numbers do not permit any mobilisation of opposition MLAs unless the BJP legislative party itself cracks, and that is unlikely. Rather, with the support of independents and some smaller parties, BJP will be well placed. And, the 'loyalty' pledges that Congress got its candidates to swear may not prove as durable as the party might hope for. Importantly, all this will mean that the power of parties like MGP and GPF is much

# and the role of winning advantage

ANI

PRAMOD SAWANT IN PANAJI ON MARCH 10, 2022

reduced, insulating the government from being buffeted by demanding allies. The scenario of the tail wagging the dog has been all too common in Goa politics, and sectional support that MGP enjoys among the Marathi-speaking population had allowed it to punch way above its weight in the past. BJP's decision to force the exit of MGP and GFP from its government, more than making up the shortfall with Congress defectors, turned a new leaf in the state's politics, and the regional outfits appear set to play a marginal role in the days ahead. This is one big takeaway.

BJP's decision not to give Parrikar's son Utpal the Panaji ticket was not easy, given the late leader's standing in the party. But Utpal turned down alternative seats and BJP did not want to displace Monserrate from the seat where he was a strong contender while also keeping in mind the need to balance Hindu and Catholic candidates. Though BJP's election in-charge, former Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, insisted that the Parrikars are part of the BJP family, he did not budge on Panaji. Parrikar junior ended up second to Monserrate on a seat that his father had represented so successfully. The message driven home was one of party loyalty and discipline and helped BJP managers focus on the contest rather than being distracted by emotional issues such as the claims of kith and kin. Sawant, an ayurvedic doctor who inherited a difficult mantle, is now the established face of BJP having led the party to a significant win. His recent meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, besides being a stocktaking exercise, was indicative of recognition by the top brass that he is the future of the party. In a state known for fractious politics, Sawant has been able to avoid major controversies despite the state having suffered in the second wave of Covid. He is seen as a sincere and diligent administrator and the decision to drop a minister accused in a sex scandal without delay helped BJP limit damage from a serious controversy. Similarly, exits of some sitting MLAs do not seem to have hurt the party and its promise of development endured.

The other big lesson is the failure of AAP and Trinamool to make an impact, putting paid to their efforts to expand their presence in the state. While AAP has much to cheer about its win in Punjab, Trinamool leader and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee faces a sobering setback with the party drawing a blank, the high-profile presence of its MP Mahua Moitra as poll manager notwithstanding. Both AAP and Trinamool failed to internalise the nuances of Goa politics and lacked an organic flavour. Trinamool's claims of replicating its Bengal model only helped BJP argue that this would mean 'appeasement' of minorities and serve to divide Goans, a charge that gained currency with the exit of a clutch of leaders within months of joining the party. They said Trinamool had not understood Goa and was trying to play communal politics. The dissonance caused by the noisy entry of AAP and Trinamool and 7 per cent and 5 per cent votes they polled may have dented Congress prospects a bit, but hardly made an impact on the overall results. It is speculative to assume that in their absence, this vote would have entirely gone to either BJP or Congress, given that the ballots polled were more related to the influential individuals who contested on Trinamool and AAP tickets. All this added up to the need for parties to set up an organisational base and work on grooming credible local leaders as state elections are intensely local. Last-minute campaigns do not produce results and AAP met a similar fate in Uttarakhand.■

# BJP's delivery optics and total politics trumped the game. Biren Singh now has a second chance to deliver on the promises of peace, infrastructure, connectivity, prosperity and accountability

By SUDEEP CHAKRAVARTI

**Nongthombam Biren Singh, the incumbent** chief minister of Manipur whom I dub the Mahabharat Man, has scored in the just-concluded Assembly election—and with him the leading edge of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India's gateway eastern state. The application of BJP's 'total-politics' tied to Hindutva has again paid off for this man and the machinery backing him when the notions of peace and prosperity would not.

But Biren isn't exactly home, and will probably not be dry. Malaise de Manipur will persist. It's in Manipur's DNA and the state's foreseeable future. And this is how it has played out.

Biren first became chief minister of Manipur on March 15, 2017, ending the three-term run of Okram Ibobi Singh of Congress, whose administration witnessed massive human rights violations and atrocities by police, paramilitaries and Army adjuncts—all mostly papered over by the magic wand of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958. A protégé of Ibobi, Biren switched sides in late-2016, when the campaign for the previous Assembly election was in full flow. He quickly went from local BJP spokesperson to the party's chief ministerial choice.

Ibobi's desperate gambit to win Manipur for the fourth consecutive time for Congress—and for himself as chief minister—didn't pay off. In the absence of allies, the 28 seats Congress won fell short of the 31 required for majority in the 60-member house. A spectacular burst of defections from Congress added to a late campaign surge by BJP (that fetched it a count of 21, from zero previously). The support of four from the National People's Party (NPP), three from the Naga People's Front (NPF) and the finessing of an independent MLA took the coalition to a slim majority.

There was a crying need for delivering on BJP's election promises: peace, infrastructure, connectivity, prosperity, accountability—what Ibobi had been unable to provide. Moreover, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his senior BJP colleagues had publicly placed their names to it all.

In practice, BJP's optics over delivery and total politics trumped the game. By the time the incumbent BJP went into elections over two phases on February 28 and March 5, 2022, more defections from Congress had plumped up BJP's MLA numbers to 30. Congress had dropped to 13, a slim shadow of its former self.

That shadow is now slimmer. BJP has won 32 seats, Congress a skeletal five. The real legacy of these elections will be that BJP and its local mascot beat Congress not because they did grand things for Manipur but because Congress and its cohorts had for decades done way less, and now lie emasculated.

Meanwhile, NPP has increased its count to seven, and NPF to five. If these one-time local allies play tough—as they did during the term of the previous Assembly—BJP will find it difficult to carry its mandate to term.

Another problem, of course, is that this mandate is, as ever, hard-wired by Manipur's volatile ethno-geographical DNA. Of

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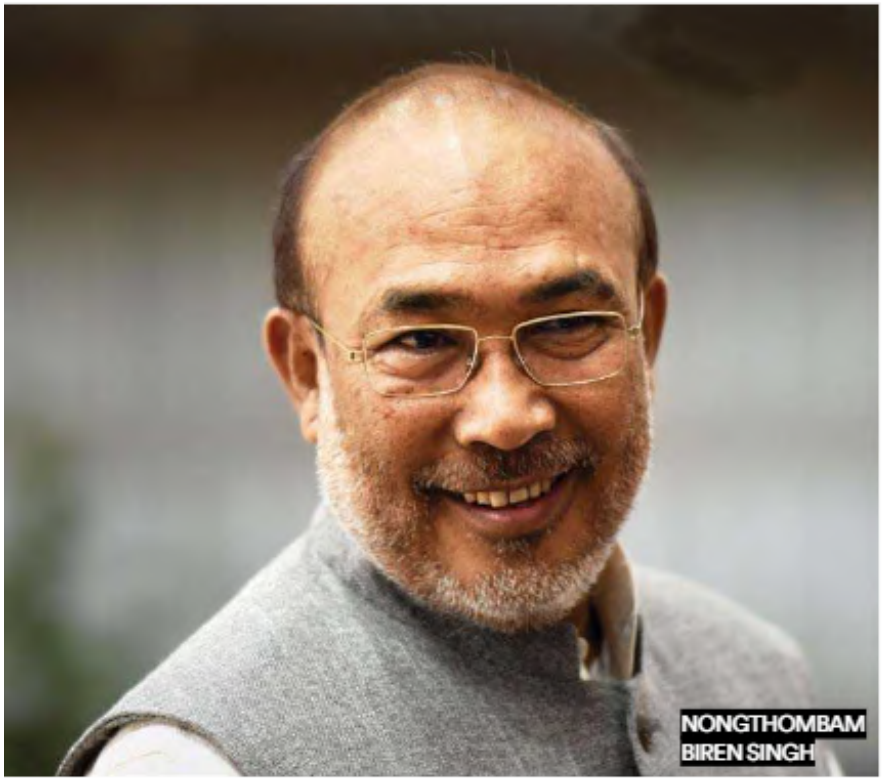

NONGTHOMBAM BIREN SINGH

the 23,000-odd square kilometres that comprise Manipur, Imphal Valley is around 1,810 square kilometres. The remaining 92 or so per cent comprises hilly terrain.

The majority Meitei community comprises about 60 per cent of the population, and lives mainly in Imphal Valley—with its eponymous capital. The valley is surrounded by hills where live tribes, mainly Naga, the Kuki—the two largest non-Meitei groups in Manipur—and the Chin, who have sub-groups sometimes collectively known as the Zomi, or the Zo people. ('Zomi' is an etymologically flipped version of 'Mizo', as those who live in Mizoram are known—Mizoram is literally the land of the Zo people). On account of this demographic heft, the plains have 40 seats in Manipur's Assembly, compared to 20 for the hills.

The Tangkhul, the second largest Naga tribe and among a dozen Naga tribes which have homelands mostly in northern Manipur—who also count handsomely among major Naga rebel factions in peace talks with the Government of India—have for long contended that the non-Meitei and by extension, the Valley, have since 1972 taken the cream of both development and infrastructure funds, and opportunities for jobs in government. That was the year Manipur was administratively upgraded from a Union territory governed directly by the Central government to a state.

Besides Manipur-based Naga tribes, which claim majority in the mineral-rich hill districts, the southern and eastern ring of hills contain mainly Kuki and Zomi peoples. Ibobi had consistently driven wider the valley-hills divide. "There is hardly anything that all three demand together as Manipuris," a senior officer of the Intelligence Bureau once told me in Imphal.

The natural, ongoing suspicion between the 'hills' and 'plains' people is also separated by religion—the Tangkhul and other tribes are overwhelmingly Baptist besides being overwhelmingly Christian, the Meitei largely Hindu-Vaishnav—language, and specific ethnic identities. Indeed, much more so now with increasing identification by many of the 'Hindu' nature of Manipur as a direct and overt push by agencies of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and only marginally less overtly by BJP.

To his credit, Biren did try to bridge the divide immediately. He went about his early days as his new role model Narendra Modi might: a blitz of inclusive and positive, if triumphalist, optics and promises and rhetoric to last a generation. Within weeks of his appointment as chief minister, Biren travelled in a motorcade to Ukhrul—enemy country for his predecessor—for the warmest welcome in 15 years accorded to that office. It helped that the local BJP was still riding on the coattails of the Framework Agreement for peace between the largest Naga rebel group, National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah) and the BJP-led Central government. Biren announced the very development projects that Ibobi could not.

But there were riders from his Naga hosts. Among these was the request that his government acknowledge the 'legitimate right' of Nagas to integrate contiguous Naga homelands that emotionally bind the state of Nagaland and the northern aspect of Manipur; rescind the new districts created at the end of Ibobi's tenure to territorially hobble the Nagas; and unequivocally support the Framework Agreement. Biren could hardly agree, because the mere suggestion of ceding territory would lead to a firestorm of protest in the Valley, the traditional Meitei redoubt—and the Sangh/BJP's emotional and electoral target audience. It's also a reason why the Framework Agreement remains inconclusive: BJP satraps wouldn't sacrifice a plum vote bank.

Short on delivery, Biren instead adopted the route of majoritarian mythology. In early 2018, he announced at a political rally in Gujarat's Madhavpura village that, in the time of Lord Krishna, Northeast India was a single entity. That, Lord Krishna "made them part of India" by marrying the princess Rukmini, whom he alluded was from Arunachal Pradesh. Many nationalists accused him of selling Manipur's soul, the same as they had other pro-Hindu campaigners. Another myth is that the Pandava ace-archer Arjun had a son, Babruvahan, with the princess Chitrangada from 'Manipur'.

The men of Mahabharat were ultimately proven to be hollow. Biren now has a second chance to prove he is not.■

*Sudeep Chakravarti is the author of* The Eastern Gate: War and Peace in Nagaland, Manipur and India's Far East

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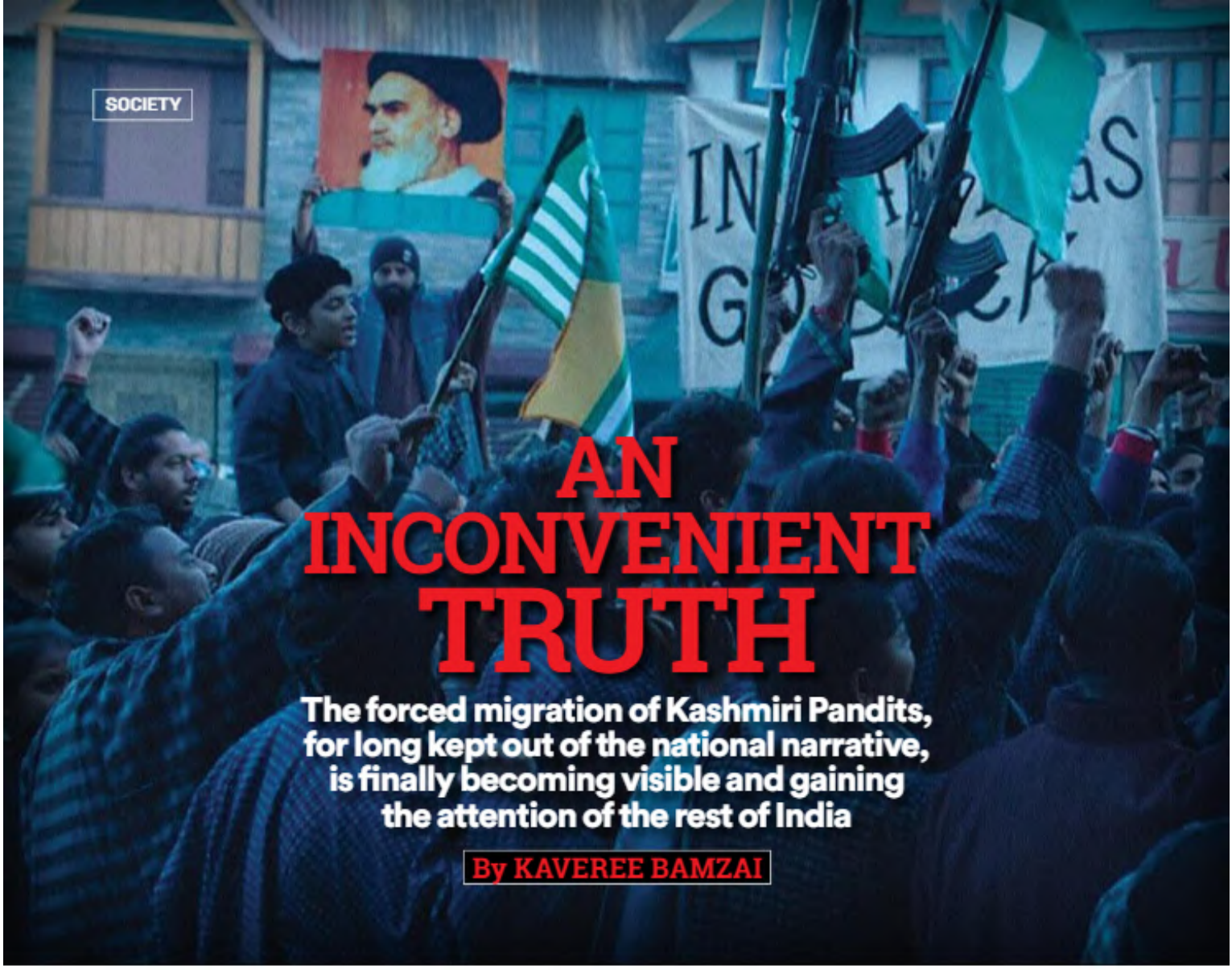


# AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH

**The forced migration of Kashmiri Pandits, for long kept out of the national narrative, is finally becoming visible and gaining the attention of the rest of India**

By KAVEREE BAMZAI

THERE ARE 24 of them, men, women, and even a child, arrayed against a wall that says "*Musalman Jago.*" One by one, Farooq Malik Bitta (based on Bitta Karate) shoots them at point-blank range with a pistol. They fall, almost weightlessly, into a mass grave. It is a recreation of the Nadimarg massacre of 2003 and it comes at the end of Vivek Ranjan Agnihotri's new movie, *The Kashmir Files*, by which time several such atrocities on Kashmiri Pandits are laid bare. The pace is relentless, almost mirroring the events leading up to the great exodus of January 19, 1990. The assassinations of prominent Kashmiri Pandits, the threats of "*relieu, gelieu, seliev*" (convert, die or flee), the calls for the men to leave and keep their women behind, and the speeches calling for Nizam-e-Mustafa are all shown with the force of a sledgehammer.

The effect—the result of over 700 testimonies by families in India and abroad collected by Agnihotri—is brutal. It is something Rohini Vaishnavi, management consultant and granddaughter of Kashmiri Pandit leader Amarnath Vaishnavi, does not want to watch. As an 18-year-old who had to depart one night for Jammu on January 20, 1990, never to return, she has lived this trauma. "Now, it is for the world to see it and acknowledge it," she says, even as she rattles off stories of a cousin seeing his father, a police officer, getting shot in the chest; an uncle and aunt who had to deal with terrorists—slipping them chits under the door, telling them terror was waiting for them on the other side, with guns; and of families forever divided, living in different cities.

She is not alone. For the proud community, the almost permanent exile from their homeland is a bitter fact of life. Even worse is that their almost silent cleansing has never been part of the national narrative. A Hindu minority in a Muslim majority state, their forced migration is almost invisible in popular culture. Until now. What began as a tiny baby step in Onir's *I Am* (2010), as a segment on the exile of Kashmiri Pandits in a four-part movie on people who live on the margins of society, has become increasingly visible and audible.

With memoirs such as Siddharth Gigoo's *The Garden of Solitude* (2010) and Rahul Pandita's *Our Moon Has Blood Clots* (2013), scholarly work by Neerja Mattoo and Shonaleela Kaul, and movies such as Vidhu Vinod Chopra's *Shikara* (2020), and now Agnihotri's *The Kashmir Files*, the drops have become a trickle. Rashneek Kher, of human rights group *Roots In Kashmir*, whose family had to leave the Valley in 1990, says the silence has broken. "Even in the media now, there is a recognition of what

A scene from *The Kashmir Files*

transpired, except for some known culprits who still do not acknowledge it. But that's all right. Memoirs like the one written by Rahul Pandita have helped immensely. The work we did either by going to university campuses or challenging separatists on news shows and by use of social media did help too."

About time. The Bollywood-isation of Kashmir has had its day. Kashmir has been the backdrop of the young man from the city finding himself a fair-skinned beauty, the ultimate fantasy of plain men from the plains throughout the 1960s and 1970s, in movies such as *Kashmir Ki Kali* (1964). Terrorism brought the Army and the police in conflict with the local population, spawning ultra-nationalist movies such as Mani Ratnam's *Roja* (1992) and the terrorist-as-rebel movies, such as Vidhu Vinod Chopra's *Mission Kashmir* (2000) and Kunal Kohli's *Fanaa* (2006). The Kashmiri Pandit was missing, even in light romances such as *Jab Jab Phool Khile* (1965), when a slinky Rita (Nanda) falls in love with a houseboat owner named Raja. No religion is specified and needed in what becomes a class rather than religious divide before happily ever after.

It is only now that the Hindus, for so long seen as the collateral damage in a war of an unjust state against innocent people, are telling their own stories. It is an inconvenient truth, but also seemingly a convenient one with the blame for misinformation falling on the current government's three biggest bugbears—left-liberal academics, independent media, and Muslims of any ethnicity. It all depends on which political ideology one adheres to. But that the exodus happened is undeniable. Trusted neighbours turned informers, houses were often ransacked, stripped even of samovars and spittoons, or sometimes just taken over by the security forces, with beautifully carved traditional doors and windows burnt for warmth during winters, and friendships broken forever.

**IT IS ONLY NOW THAT THE HINDUS ARE TELLING THEIR OWN STORIES. BY 1990, KASHMIRI PANDITS HAD NO CHOICE. *THE KASHMIR FILES* SHOWS THE BUILD-UP: RATION BEING DENIED TO PANDIT WOMEN, PAKISTANI CURRENCY BEING USED IN BAZAARS, AND THE PAKISTAN FLAG REPLACING THE TRICOLOUR**

The number of Kashmiri Pandits who had to flee ranges from two lakh to five lakh, just as the number assassinated varies from 290 to 5,000. Historian and professor at JNU, Shonaleeka Kaul, says, "Public acknowledgment of the Kashmiri Pandit exile has

A scene from *The Kashmir Files*

**IN *THE KASHMIR FILES*, THE ASSASSINATIONS OF PROMINENT KASHMIRI PANDITS, THE THREATS OF '*RELIEV, GELIEV, SELIEV*' (CONVERT, DIE OR FLEE), THE CALLS FOR THE MEN TO LEAVE AND KEEP THEIR WOMEN BEHIND, AND THE SPEECHES CALLING FOR NIZAM-E-MUSTAFA ARE ALL SHOWN WITH THE FORCE OF A SLEDGEHAMMER**

only just started in earnest. There remains resistance to it in certain quarters. But it is this relatively increased popular interest, especially after the negation of Article 370, that has perhaps given rise to the recent movies on the theme, rather than the other way round. As for academics, Kashmir as a whole has always been woefully under-represented in course curricula, but a trickle of research work on the displacement and human rights of the KP community can now be seen in disciplines such as sociology."

Little work has been done on the history of Kashmiri Pandit resistance over the years, with the focus being on the oppression of Muslims by the security forces, most effectively in Vishal Bhardwaj's critically acclaimed *Haider* (2014). But as *The Chronicles of Kashmir*, a self-published book edited by Vaishnavi shows, the Pandits have also had cause to agitate—for instance, the Praja Parishad protests of 1952-53 for "*Ek Vidhan, Ek Pradhan, Ek Nishan*/One Constitution, one prime minister, one flag". The systematic marginalisation of the community became an accepted fact of life says, Aparna Challu, whose Respect Origins promotes direct sourcing and fair trade. Admissions to courses in medicine and engineering were denied, despite adequate marks, on one ground or another, while jobs were given to Muslim candidates often with poorer qualifications.

The Parmeshwari Agitation in 1967, which few recall, was when things came to a head. Parmeshwari Handoo, a 17-year-old girl, eloped with a Muslim man, Ghulam Rasool Kanth, or was abducted by him, depending on which version one believed. Both worked in the government grocery store at the Lalla Rukh Hotel on Lal Chowk in Srinagar. Using this event as an opportunity, Kashmiri Pandits expressed their pent-up demands for equal rights and opportunities in jobs and admissions. They presented a memorandum to the governments at the state and Centre. They promised to fulfil all their demands, provided they withdrew the agitation, which had almost reached its peak. YB Chavan flew to Srinagar and called all Kashmiri Pandit leaders for a meeting at DP Dhar's house. He begged them to call off the agitation with the words "*Nahin to saara Hindustan jal jayega*/the whole of India will burn." That was the end. The Kashmiri Pandit leaders trusted the politicians and withdrew the agitation.

Not for the first time, they were let down.

That was when many Kashmiri Pandits realised that Kashmir had no future for them. By 1990, they had no choice. *The Kashmir Files* shows the build-up—ration being denied to Pandit women, Pakistani currency being used in bazaars, and the Pakistan flag replacing the Tricolour. What was seen by the whole world as an abnormality in 1983, when spectators came waving Pakistani flags as India played Australia at the Sher-e-Kashmir stadium in Srinagar, became commonplace.

Challu makes the point that the Pandits were systematically stripped of their identity, with the state weeding them out of jobs and academic institutions. "The history of the Pandits has been subsumed under the narrative of political conflict, with no explanation for why an entire community had to jump on to trucks, their homes occupied, their legacies wiped out." What was meant to be a few weeks of absence, turned into years and decades, which Anupam Kher's character in *The Kashmir Files* captures so well, the increasingly demented Pushkar Nath Pandit, who writes 6,000 letters to the prime minister hoping he will respond to their plight. He doesn't. It is like the lead character of *Shikara*, like many men who lost their identity as intellectuals, professionals, and persons of worth.

The tragedy is that the collective memory of both communities is happening at the expense of the other. Even in *Rumours of Spring: A Girlhood in Kashmir*, Farah Bashir's sensitive account of growing up during the militancy, Kashmiri Pandits appear only as ghosts, as sometime neighbours, class teachers, and classmates. And then, poof, one day they are gone, and there is no attempt to consider why they never returned.

Challu says once the words come, the acknowledgement will follow, and they will be able to cry. A million pieces of glass their hearts shattered into, and which are still embedded in their souls, will heal. Finally. For isn't that the purpose of creating art? ■

# PITCH PERFECT

## A unique contest in the social sector shows the potential of good storytelling in philanthropy

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

KAARIGAR CLINIC IS a business doctor for those who never would have the opportunity to see such a doctor. The first patient that would tell its co-founder Nilesh Priyadarshi whether the concept had a future was Pabiben, an embroidery artisan from the nomadic Rabari community in Kutch. Modern market culture is faceless. Go to a mall and see any product, the consumer doesn't know who made them and the artisan does not know who is using his or her creation. "We came to the conclusion that if brands are created out of names of the artisans, then they will get an identity in the market and connect to it. Artisans don't have formal education or skills of business, design and management to start their own business. We developed a model," he says. Pabiben was their first test case. They worked for three years on setting up her business and a brand called pabiben.com. "Pabiben's journey started with ₹1,500. Now, she has a turnover

of ₹40 lakh. In her village, she gives work to 300 women. When the model became successful, we realised that India could have thousands of Pabibens. We started Kaarigar Clinic. We will give them a platform and business ecosystem. Work with them for two to three years creating a brand in their name and slowly make them able to independently run the business. We have developed four artisan brands and are associated with more than a thousand artisans," says Priyadarshi. But Kaarigar Clinic, based out of Gujarat, was itself a small outfit and could use resources and recognition. That was how Priyadarshi found himself in February making a pitch in a unique online competition before hundreds of potential donors, mostly from the corporate world.

> **"Right now, I have a team under me. My work is to deal with corporates, to find them on LinkedIn, take a meeting, explain about Maya CARE and raise funds. We don't just get a livelihood but also the blessings of the elderly we assist"**
>
> **Nilesh Borde** project coordinator, Maya CARE Foundation

Another person doing a pitch on the same day there was Nilesh Borde. Just a year back, he had been an introvert spending most of his time inside his home, earning a livelihood giving tuitions. That day, even though he had the jitters before the presentation began, once the camera got rolling, the words came easy and confident. Borde is physically disabled, unable to walk with cerebral palsy. He was representing Maya CARE Foundation, an NGO started by Manjiri Gokhale Joshi and her husband Abhay Joshi. Their idea was to bring together the disabled and very aged, so that the former could help out with the latter's needs. For the first 11 years, the Joshis, professionals with daily jobs, ran the organisation from personal funds garnered through their salaries. "In 2020, we were at a crossroads. I had quit my job and we couldn't run it like earlier. We decided to change strategy, to build a team and look for external funds. We never had a steady team until then. Now, we have 100 persons with disabilities working with us. Out of 100, we identified 15 as leaders and critical talent. They are on their way to lead the functions and take the organisation forward." When Borde got in touch with them, they sensed his potential and put him in charge of fundraising. "If you had met me a year back, you would never think I would be someone given such responsibilities. Right now, I have a team under me. My work is to deal with corporates, to find them on LinkedIn, take a meeting, explain about Maya CARE and raise funds. We don't just get a livelihood, but also the blessings of the elderly whom we assist," he says.

The organisation that brought Maya CARE and Kaarigar Clinic on the same platform was Social Ventures Partners (SVP), which itself is unusual in many ways. SVP predominantly comprises people from the corporate world who felt a need to do something beyond the daily grind that they were so successful at. Engaged philanthropy, their philosophy, insists on them not just giving money, but also time, in bringing their corporate skills to mentor those engaged in social causes. For example, Sanjay Parikh, co-founder of Indigene Lifesystems, a health tech services and solutions provider to the global pharmaceutical industry. He had called up Govind Iyer, a partner at Egon Zehnder, a global management consultancy and leadership advisory firm, for a professional reason. Iyer is also the chairperson of SVP India, and during the conversation, told Parikh about it. It piqued his interest. Parikh said, "It was at a time when I was coming fresh off a pretty large fundraising event that we had done, stepping back to look at what I wanted to kind of tee up for the next several years of my life as well. This really resonated."

SVP is a global organisation. Its India chapter first started in Bengaluru and at the time Iyer, who is based in Mumbai, used to fly down for the monthly meetings. Since then, they have expanded across the country. Iyer says their approach is simple. "It's bringing people like Sanjay and myself together and sitting together around the table, deciding what causes we can support in our city. We identify NGOs that make a difference, talk to and understand them, see whether we want to invest time and money. Besides funds, over a year, we spend about 100 to 200 hours with the NGOs, help them grow and scale." SVP had a version of Fast Pitch abroad, and Iyer decided that it was time to have an Indian edition. "About four years ago, I heard about Fast Pitch. It was happening in the US, and it's kind of been my dream to make this happen here."

THE FIRST FAST Pitch in India was organised over an evening in the beginning of February. From 61 applications that they received, 12 had been shortlisted. They had deliberately only called for small and medium NGOs who needed the funds and exposure more. The selected NGOs spent over two months preparing their five-minute pitch. They were assisted in this by SVP which brought in a storytelling coach plus mentors from the corporate world. Priyadarshi says, "Until then, our perception had been to explain about our organisation in detail, and in as many words as possible. The storytelling coach told us to do it in as little time as possible to make an impression on the person in front of you. Once we made a draft pitch, we would then show it to our mentors who would give suggestions on making it better." So it was with Borde too. He said, "When I got training from my

**"We identify NGOs that make a difference, talk to and understand them, see whether we want to invest time and money. Besides funds, over a year, we spend about 100 to 200 hours with the NGOs, help them grow and scale"**

**Govind Iyer** chairperson, SVP India

**"If brands are created out of names of the artisans, then they will get an identity in the market and connect to it. Artisans don't have formal education or skills of business, design and management to start their own business. We developed a model"**

**Nilesh Priyadarshi** cofounder, Kaarigar Clinic

three coaches, my confidence kept developing."

Sanjay Parikh was one of those SVP Partners who coached a participant. He says, "Our role was to cut out the fat from their presentations. Their stories were compelling but when they started talking, they were trying to mix in many things. Whereas in a five-minute pitch, you've to build that emotional connect with your audience first. It's what we do even internally in my organisation. If I'm head of sales, what I'm telling my sales guys is 'Don't complicate the message'. As coaches, our point was number one: What is important? Number two: What is the key message you want to highlight? Call that out."

THE WINNERS WERE announced after the last pitch was made. Kaarigar Clinic won the first prize of ₹15 lakh. That was not all. While the pitches were happening, SVP had created a fundraiser profile for the NGOs on Giveindia, from where Kaarigar also got ₹10 lakh as donations. "What we got in total was more than our annual budget. We are going to introduce a digital marketplace called *kaarigar ki dukaan*, where we will have a zero per cent commission platform. All *kaarigars* will have their individual digital store there. These funds will help in that," says Pryadarshi.

Maya CARE shared the second prize. They got ₹10 lakh, and it couldn't have been more timely. A few months ago, they had been on the verge of running out of funds. Manjiri Gokhale Joshi says, "On average, we spend about ₹4 lakh a month in paying the people who work for us to serve the elderly. We have 120 people who are disabled, and we support them. We are now in 31 cities. So, there is a lot of money involved because everybody is dependent on us. Not once have we not paid. Recently, we had just ₹4,000 in the bank and soon had to pay salaries. And then we got a grant, and then the Fast Pitch prize. It is a welcome breather and will carry us for two months. There was also a crowdfunding done by SVP during the event, and the amount we got from that was ₹12 lakh. It is such a huge relief."

The other second prize was won by Stonesoup, a Bengaluru-based organisation that also works on a unique concept. Stonesoup was founded by a group of women residing in the same housing society who wanted to do something about waste segregation there. The success and spread of that eventually led to a trust that now has its primary focus on something no one really thinks about—how exactly do disposable sanitary pads get disposed? Their answer is that it doesn't. In her Fast Pitch presentation, Padma Subramanian, the head of Stonesoup Trust, said that the pads can't be dumped in landfills because the plastic lasts thousands of years; they can't be flushed because the line will get clogged; if you burn them, they release toxins into the air. India, with 335 million menstruating women, becomes home to 12 billion non-disposable sanitary pads every year. Stonesoup's solution is to promote the use of menstrual cups. They last a decade and just one of them prevents the use of as many as 1,800 disposable pads. Subramanian says that the experience of Fast Pitch has changed their perspective on how to present themselves. "All of us like stories, and learning how to make content out of our own work was very interesting." Stonesoup won ₹10 lakh as a prize and got an additional ₹4.5 lakh from the Giveindia platform. The funds will help in an ambitious pilot programme to create a zero-sanitary waste municipal ward. Says Stonesoup trustee Malini Parmar, "It's not been done anywhere in the world. We were apprehensive of asking the government for the money because the payments often don't come. And we don't have deep enough pockets to fund it ourselves. So, these funds are going to cover almost 50 per cent cost of that pilot."

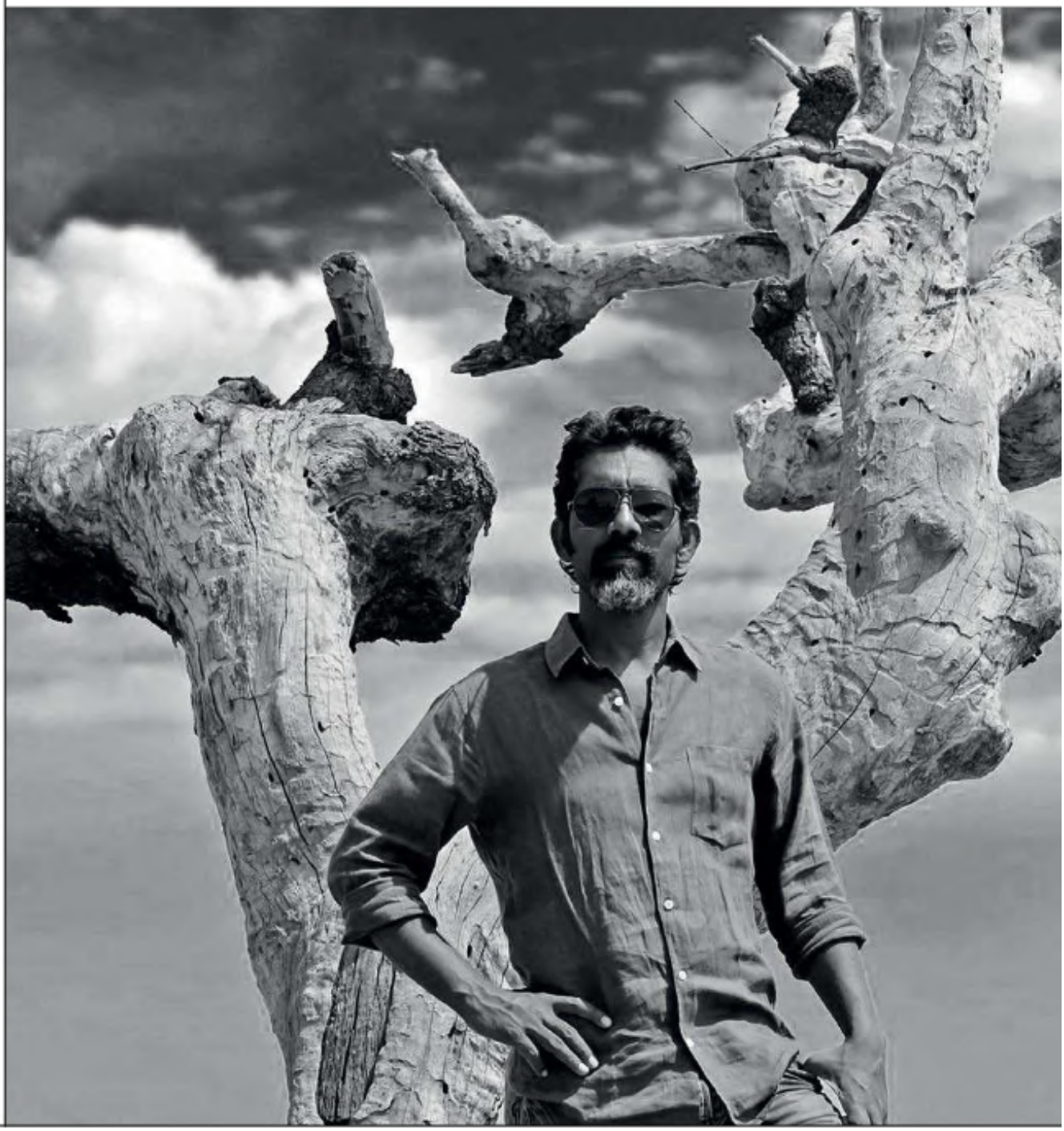
SVP India is keen on doing Fast Pitch as at least an annual event from now on. Iyer says, "The Indian social sector is at a cottage industry stage. There are lots of good people doing lots of amazing stuff, but they've all not come together yet to create a glue to make it from a small-scale to a mid-scale enterprise. We need a body that will work with all NGOs. Fast Pitch was a first step, to curate 12 NGOs, tell people out there these 12 do amazing work. There are very few platforms that give space for an NGO to really scream loud. I'm hoping that many others will do Fast Pitch-type events. This is the way to get the sector going." ■

CINEMA

# The Troubadour of Our

## NAGRAJ MANJULE'S THIRD FEATURE FILM IS YET SHARP CRITIQUE OF UPPER-CASTE OPPRESSION, HIM AS THE TRUTHTELLER OF MARATHI CINEMA

By Kaveree Bamzai



# Times

## ANOTHER ESTABLISHING AND BEYOND

"I HAVEN'T REACHED THE MOON. EVERY SLUM YOU LOOK AT IN INDIA, WHAT DO YOU SEE? A STATUE OF BABASAHEB AMBEDKAR, BLUE WALLS. I AM MERELY SHOWING YOU WHAT YOU TURN AWAY FROM"
**Nagraj Manjule** filmmaker

**Nagraj Manjule is not afraid of getting** his hands deep into his craft. During the lockdown when he was looking for an actor to play the part of a funeral worker in his short film *Vaikunth* for Amazon Prime Video's anthology *Unpaused: Naya Safar*, his friends suggested he do it. He did. Much like Chankya, the bicycle mechanic in his debut feature film, *Fandry* (2013), who sees himself in the young boy who yearns for the upper-caste girl, the personal is always political for Manjule. He is a storyteller who speaks from his own experience, who says it like it is, even if it hurts.

His heroes are not victims. They may be 'rejects' of society, just like the centre-piece of his new film, *Jhund*, a slum built on waste, but they are not pitiful characters who demand our sympathy. They are young men and sometimes young women, trying to live the best lives they know how. The trouble is the world won't let them, condemning them to sniffing glue and petty thievery. But when they do get an opportunity, they come into their own, playing football their way, shoeless, gearless, but with a passion that is unique.

With *Fandry*, *Sairat* (2016), and now *Jhund*, Manjule, 44, has established himself as a troubadour of our times, one who will not let society look away from caste. But he does it with such matter-of-fact humility that it is easy to forget his star status. When *Sairat* made ₹100 crore at the box office, the first Marathi film to do so, it did something special for both Marathi cinema and Manjule. It made people realise there was an audience for these stories, told simply, with authenticity and ambition. That it was all right to show the reality—that happily ever after is not always possible especially when it comes to two people of two castes trying to find love. As Manjule said recently, it doesn't matter to him who the jailer is. All he knows is that he is in jail, and has been in one, metaphorically, for over 10,000 years.

With such clarity of thought, window-dressing is not necessary. It is the same in *Jhund*, where Amitabh Bachchan plays Vijay Borade, based on the real-life character of Vijay Barse, a retired school teacher who created a football team out of slum boys and girls in Gaddi Godam, adjacent to his school in Nagpur. When Manjule had to choose actors to play the characters in his film, he had to send his brother Bhushan to do the auditions, because he is so well known now, especially after his stint as the host of *Kaun Banega Crorepati* in Marathi (2019). They auditioned over 400 children to finally choose the cast of 25 who played the children in the film. Manjule then did workshops with them for about nine months before they could get comfortable, with him standing in for Bachchan. When Bachchan joined the cast, it took the children just a few days to adjust to him as a co-star. "Mr Bachchan would also talk to them as equals in between takes. It made a big difference," says Manjule. The film was shot between December 2018 and March 2019 over 70 days and would have released earlier if the pandemic hadn't intervened.

But he wanted the film to be released in theatres. "There is nothing like watching a film in a *samuh* (collective)," he says. Bhushan Kumar of T-Series and independent producer Savita Hiremath brought Vijay Barse's story to him and said they wanted to make the film with Bachchan. "I did the research and understood the subject. I wrote it in ten months, narrated it to him, he liked it, and we were on," he says.

His movies are hard hitting, but there is also a lot of joy in them. The stolen moments between the lovers in *Sairat* as they dream of a house by the river with a garden, or in *Fandry* where the boy imagines he will sprinkle love

potion on his beloved and she will be his, or in *Jhund* when Ankush Gedam as Ankush Masram wants to live an addiction-free life. There is dancing and celebrating, a full-on living of life, where even Bachchan bows before a statue of BR Ambedkar. There is a quiet intersectionality of the peripherals here, as in his short film *Vaikunth*, where a young Muslim boy asks the funeral worker's son to play with him. "It is not good if we oppress each other. If Covid-19 has taught us anything it is that the only way we can resolve our troubles is together," he says. He underplays his importance as a filmmaker: "I haven't reached the moon. Every slum you look at in India, what do you see? A statue of Babasaheb Ambedkar, blue walls. I am merely showing you what you turn away from," he adds.

AMITABH BACHCHAN IN *JHUND*

**In doing that, he has** become an inspiration for many. Akash Thosar, the young protagonist he cast in *Sairat* who also appears in *Jhund*, says, "He is a mentor, a philosopher to me. He is the pride of Marathi cinema but he does not belong only to Marathi cinema or Marathi people. He is the voice of common people from every corner of the world. He is the voice of common people who are struggling for their basic rights and identity." And he inspires them to craft their own narratives.

Manjule grew up in Jeur village in the Solapur district of Maharashtra. He belongs to the traditionally nomadic Waddar community, and like many—but not all—before him, has used education to empower himself, doing a Masters of Arts in Marathi literature from the University of Pune and then a MA in communication studies from New Arts, Science and Commerce College, Ahmednagar. "I didn't even know I could make films, or that anyone would want to watch them," he says.

Sonia Ghalian, an academic, has studied Manjule's cinema and his critique of caste and class, especially in light of the experiences of those from marginal backgrounds. She says, "His personal experiences are reflected in his work, the themes he chooses for his films, and the manner he portrays Dalit consciousness." He has also given other filmmakers the freedom to own their identities with pride. Neeraj Ghaywan, who made *Masaan* (2015) and *Geeli Pucchi* (2021), says his ability to "combine astute life observation, stories of the subaltern, with a keen eye on mainstream appeal, is truly an inspiration. And to do all that without compromising his vision is a mark of genius."

Due to *Sairat*'s immense popularity, two additional shows—one at midnight and one at 3 am—were introduced at Rahimatpur in Satara district. It has since been remade in various languages—*Channa Mereya* (2017) in Punjabi, *Manasu Mallige* (2017) in Kannada, *Laila O Laila* (2017) in Odia, *Noor Jahaan* (2018) in Bengali, *Dhadak* (2018) in Hindi. Out of these, only the Kannada remake retains the caste politics, whereas all the other "versions" translate it to the class differential.

He believes films can have an impact, at least he hopes so. "The other day someone called saying he'd like to help four youngsters achieve their dreams after he saw *Jhund*, it's wonderful," he says. Manjule is acting in a new film with Thosar and Sayaji Shinde called *Ghar Banduk Biryani*, which he calls an "*alag* (different)" kind of film. He is writing too, but it's far too early to say what.

Marathi cinema has not had a colossal star since the time, perhaps, of Dada Kondke though there has been a resurgence of the cinema in the new multiplex-dominated millennium. As film scholar Akshaya Kumar of Indian Institute of Technology, Indore writes, "Kondke's figure rose at a time when Marathi films' distribution was restricted to small-town theatres, and rural *jatras* were hosting touring talkies." Kumar notes that Kondke's movies usually featured the sexualised heroine of *tamasha*, felicity with sexual innuendos, and song-dance sequences invoking rural Maharashtra. Since then, the most celebrated stars of the Marathi film industry, particularly Nana Patekar, Atul Kulkarni and Riteish Deshmukh, have all held long stints in the middle-rung of Hindi films, and are better known for that.

Manjule has displaced that misplaced ribaldry and the second-hand fame with his quiet though seething anger. He has the ability to see the reality of Bharat and India, which makes him the star that Marathi cinema has long looked for. His perspective comes to the fore in moments such as—the stone that Jabya throws at the end of *Fandry* at the village that is heckling him for his Dalit status; the hacking to death of Archie, the upper-caste Maratha girl, at the end of *Sairat* because of her transgressive love for Parshya who belongs to the "outcaste" fishing community; and the plane that takes off at the end of *Jhund* even as a public notice on the ground says, "Crossing the walls is strictly prohibited. Offenders will be prosecuted". As the song 'Laat Maar' in *Jhund* says, "*Aisa karnama karde/ jhande gaad de/aaye raaste mein tere/jo bhi faad de* (Do something to plant your flag there, just destroy anyone who stands in your way)." There is nothing apologetic or wimpish about Manjule's statement of intent: he wants you to look at reality, face the truth, and see society's oppressions eye to eye.

'Laat Maar' reminds us, "*Zamaane ki nazar mein tu bhale hi bhangaar hai/Tere bhi seene mein kahin toh angaar hai* (You may be penniless in the eyes of the world, but the fire burns in your heart, too)." Similarly, the fire in Manjule's heart and films burns deep and strong. ■

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# THE RIGHT REBELS

## Pramod Kapoor restores the Royal Indian Navy Mutiny to its proper place in the history of the freedom struggle

By Vinay Lal

DECADES AGO, I came across Robin Winks' *The Historian as Detective*, and was reminded of it when reading Pramod Kapoor's *1946—Last War of Independence: Royal Indian Navy Mutiny*, quite likely the most capacious and unquestionably the most lively account we have of 'the last war of independence', or what is sometimes alleged to be the final jolt to the British Raj that perhaps even hastened the end of colonial rule in India. Kapoor, who is the publisher of Roli Books but also has a flair for writing and an eye for detail, has left no stone unturned in his endeavour to research the history of the Royal Indian Navy Mutiny, which erupted on February 18, 1946, in Bombay though the unrest then spread to Calcutta, Karachi, Madras, and elsewhere. He probes archival records, wades through the evidence collected by a commission of inquiry, interviews relatives of the major players, and pursues every lead. His hunt for the ratings who took part in the mutiny—some call it a strike—took him across the country, and his book concludes with a charming epilogue on the "people, places and ship" that populate his narrative.

It is precisely because Kapoor is not a professional historian that he is liberated from some of the unwieldy protocols of the profession, even as he is sometimes prompted into voicing opinions with which complete agreement is difficult. Where in other hands this might have turned out to be a liability, Kapoor sallies

TIMES CONTENT

Royal Indian Navy mutineers in the Fort area of Bombay, February 19, 1946

forth with a full awareness both of the power of a good story and his own gifts at storytelling. The mutiny lasted but a few days, and he keeps you on the edge with a detailed, almost hourly, account of how the events unfolded, though the tenseness of the moment is occasionally relieved with an ironical observation, a gripping anecdote, and a sprinkling of bon mots. All this is anchored in a larger narrative sketch, which lays out the circumstances in which the mutiny erupted and its reverberations throughout the country, though it becomes clear from the outset that Kapoor is animated by one central consideration. He seeks to restore the mutiny, which he argues has been consigned to a footnote in most histories, to its proper place in the history of the freedom struggle; correspondingly, he elicits the reader's admiration for the rebels who were not only betrayed by the nationalist leadership but suffered the ignominy of dishonourable discharge from the navy and sent back penniless to their villages on a one-way ticket with a simple injunction: 'Do not ever come back to Bombay.' Most of the rebels were never heard from again; they became lost to history.

In its bare outlines, the story of the mutiny is easily told. World War II saw a considerable expansion both in the Royal Indian Navy and the Royal Indian Air Force. In all three services of the armed forces, the end of the war had brought to the fore the problems posed by demobilisation and the poor prospects for gainful employment of men released into civilian life. Still, recruits to the navy were lured with promises of a steady job, good food, decent pay, and the thrill of an exciting job. But working conditions were far removed from this ideal, and the disparities between British and Indian sailors were considerable. Indian sailors not only resented the rotten food, often little more than watery dal peppered with stones, but they also had to face vile racial abuse from English officers. The 'degrading' and 'inhuman' service conditions aside, many of the ratings, like most Indians, had been moved by the political developments following the end of the war. The colonial state launched a prosecution of Indian officers belonging to the Indian National Army (INA) in November 1945, charging Colonel Prem Singh, Major-General Shah Nawaz Khan, and Colonel Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon with murder and "waging war against the King-Emperor." This was perceived as an outrage to the nation, more particularly because the trial was conducted at a time when negotiations for India's independence were underway and therefore put into serious question Britain's intentions, and the massive groundswell of opinion in favour of the accused compelled the British to commute the sentences of the accused who had predictably been found guilty.

However, other INA trials were still proceeding when, on February 18, 1946, the ratings at the Colaba-based *HMIS Talwar*, a signal school, mutinied. Though the Commission of Inquiry that was later appointed announced that the mutiny was "not pre-planned", Kapoor's meticulously constructed narrative suggests otherwise, or at least allows us to say that the truth lies somewhere in between. There was no "outside agency", but discontent was widespread and the ratings were keen to air their grievances. The food was bad, but as Kapoor narrates it, the intrepid Kusum Nair—later a formidable authority on agricultural practices in India, Japan, and the United States—who was involved in the "plot" ensured that small stones were placed in the dal on the 17th night "in order to enrage and instigate all the ratings into open rebellion". That the disaffection against the British went back many months is illustrated by the fact that the senior telegraphist on *HMIS Talwar*, Balai Chand Dutt, whose memoir is a key source, engineered to have the parade ground on December 1, 1945, when the city's ship and shore establishments were going to be displayed to the public, sprayed with signs—"Quit India", "Kill the British", "Down with the Imperialists", "Revolt Now"—clearly intended to humiliate the British.

There would be many other little acts of insurrection on *HMIS Talwar* over the next several weeks and on February 18 the ratings finally threw the gauntlet to their superior British officers. That day, Arthur King, Commanding Officer (CO) of the ship, hurled abuses at them, describing them as "Sons of Bloody *Junglees*", "Sons of Bitches", and "Sons of Coolies". Over 100 pages, Kapoor describes how the mutiny spread from one ship to another and to shore establishments, and to naval stations at other cities. The mutiny at its height involved 20 shore establishments,

**1946—LAST WAR OF INDEPENDENCE**
**ROYAL INDIAN NAVY MUTINY**
Pramod Kapoor

Roli Books
**376 pages | ₹695**

**The mutiny at its height involved 20 shore establishments, over 75 ships, and 20,000 sailors; according to Pramod Kapoor, the correspondence of Prime Minister Clement Attlee and Viceroy Archibald Wavell, points to the 'fright and panic that had set into the British administration'**

over 75 ships, and 20,000 sailors; according to Kapoor, the correspondence of Prime Minister Clement Attlee and the Viceroy, Archibald Wavell, points to the "fright and panic that had set into the British administration". The navy lay at the heart of the British Empire; moreover, there was a palpable fear that the unrest might spread to the other services. Airmen at the Royal Indian Air Force station at Karachi had already struck in January, but the unrest, no doubt spurred in part by the naval strike, would spread through February and beyond to over 50 other air stations in India and even Southeast Asia and West Asia. The British were inclined to use heavy force to subdue the mutineers in Bombay and adopt a "take no prisoners" approach. Kapoor tells us that at one point, incensed by Admiral Godfrey's threat that he was prepared to countenance "the destruction of the navy" but would not tolerate insubordination, the ratings had "trained their guns from the ships towards Gateway of India and the Yacht Club", but he argues that this "was purely a defensive tactic" intended "mainly to target the British troops being amassed in that area".

The ratings who struck at Bombay formed the Naval Central Strike Committee that issued a set of demands which suggests that these subalterns were politically astute and thought beyond their own grievances. Besides asking for better food, working conditions, and respect—and this call to be treated with dignity should always resonate—they also called for the release of all INA prisoners, withdrawal of Indian troops from Indonesia where they were being used to thwart the legitimate political aspirations of Indonesians, and employment for demobilised men. Meanwhile, the strike had attracted extraordinary support throughout the city, and newspaper accounts and testimonies from those days point to unusual scenes of fraternisation among the striking sailors and Bombay's citizens. Food was freely distributed to the ratings and shopkeepers refused to accept payment. Students, labour activists, mill workers, and others were forthcoming in their assistance to the rebels and called for a city-wide *hartal*, and British efforts to subdue crowds led to police firings and violence in the streets. By the end of day on February 22, over 60 people had been killed; the following morning's *Hindustan Times* had a headline that ran across the length of the paper, "Bombay in Revolt: City a Battlefield". The same day, however, much to the shock of the ratings, the strike committee's leadership capitulated to the demand, not only by the British but by the Congress leadership, that the strike be declared over. The ratings surrendered, on the understanding, delivered by Sardar Patel, that they would not be penalised.

GETTY IMAGES

**India was not yet free, but it was on the verge of independence, and Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Patel were committed to the idea that civilian control over the military must always remain an inviolable principle of a democratic state. One suspects that, from their standpoint, condoning the action of the mutineers would establish an unhealthy precedent and certainly did not augur well for 'military discipline' in what was poised to become free India**

"WHEN AURORA ZOGOIBY", the fictional character in Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*, "heard that the Naval Strike Committee had been persuaded by the Congress leadership to call off the stoppage…her disappointment with the world at it was burst its banks.…she was thinking the same things [as the defeated sailors]—that the Congress were acting like chamchas, toadies.… When the masses do actually rise up, she thought, the bosses turn tail. Brown bosses, white bosses, it was the same thing." That the pledge to the ratings was not honoured is, as Kapoor rightly points out, a matter of disgrace and shame to the nation. Neither the Congress nor the Muslim League was supportive of the strike; the communists alone, in his narrative, come out with flying colours. The position of the communists at this juncture was, however, more complex than Kapoor's analysis suggests. Their refusal to support the Quit India movement had discredited them, and they had much ground to recover; on the other hand, a more holistic view of communist politics in 1945-46 would entail a consideration of the Tebhaga movement in Bengal, the Telangana Rebellion in Hyderabad state, and other forms of unrest that would give us a more nuanced view of the communist support of the naval mutiny.

With regards to the Muslim League, the reader will find priceless Kapoor's recounting—drawing upon retired Pakistani Rear-Admiral Mian Zahir Shah's book, *Bubbles of Water, or, Anecdotes of the Pakistan Navy*—of the meeting that transpired

between the Muslim rebels and Jinnah on February 21, the third day of the mutiny. Only minutes into the meeting the ratings and petty officers, who had shared with the Quaid-e-Azam their grievances, realised that he was "not in favour of them going on with the mutiny." There remained little to talk about; however, an hour had been allotted for the exchange, and everyone made small talk. As the conversation was drawing to a close, Jinnah asked the ratings, "By the way, what are you all wearing?" One rating replied, "Uniform, sir." "No," said the Quaid-e-Azam, "this is not uniform, since a uniform means '*ek jaisa*' and implies uniformity." "You call this uniform? Some are wearing khakis, some whites; some shorts, some longs; some shoes, some boots. Remember, uniform is a sense of discipline; and without discipline there can be no welfare." The men looked at one another and thought to themselves, "The Quaid was worse than their CO!" As his visitors prepared to leave, the Quaid added, with a far-away look, "I would want *uniform*, and *discipline*, in the Pakistan Navy.""

We may reasonably infer from Jinnah's remark the reasons why the Congress, and particularly Jawaharlal Nehru, Maulana Azad, and Sardar Patel, could not bring themselves to support the strike and prevailed upon the rebels to throw in the towel. Kapoor is somewhat more tolerant of Gandhi, since, as he often states, both the Mahatma's aversion to violence and his rigid insistence that the use of violence was antithetical to the idea of *swaraj* are unimpeachable facts and one expects that Gandhi would not have been supportive of the strike. It is the attitude of the other Congress leaders, however, that clearly disturbs him and moves him to critique them for their pusillanimity and betrayal of the ratings who had not only displayed exemplary bravery but whose own display of Hindu-Muslim unity was precisely the ideal otherwise held up by the Congress. Kapoor accepts the view put forward by some historians, namely that the Congress was generally opposed to political movements that had not originated within the party or that it could not control. Patel was convinced that "the communists are intent on working up a state of chaos", but Kapoor, while recognising that the Congress leadership viewed the communists as opportunists, does not pursue this line of inquiry. He veers rather to the view that "sensing a transfer of power and imminent independence, the Congress did not want to rock the boat at this critical juncture. So the Congress leaders were bent on persuading the ratings to remain peaceful and surrender unconditionally, giving them assurances that were well beyond Congress' capability to deliver."

One might reasonably aver, as does Ashis Nandy, that Kapoor's "book is a challenge to us to take a second look at our revered political figures whose charismatic public presence often hid their own insecure ruthlessness and narcissism, both leavened with a touch of hypocrisy." Or, to put it simply, the humble ratings were thrown to the wolves. The "evidence" seems to support such a reading, but Nandy, as much as anyone else, understands the unforgiving logic of the nation-state. Patel later defended his objection to the strike with the observation that "discipline in the Army cannot be tampered with … We will want the Army even in free India." India was not yet free, but it was on the verge of independence, and Nehru and Patel were committed to the idea that civilian control over the military must always remain an inviolable principle of a democratic state. One suspects that, from their standpoint, condoning the action of the mutineers would establish an unhealthy precedent and certainly did not augur well for "military discipline" in what was poised to become free India. It is striking, as Kapoor himself notes, that "Indian navy officers did not, or perhaps could not, back the ratings and they stayed loyal to the Royal Indian Navy." He goes on to argue that in independent India most of them went on to have very distinguished careers in the navy and their "devotion to their country remained beyond reproach." Surely, however, given the ardour with which he supports the ratings and berates the Congress leaders, Kapoor might have reflected more on why Indian officers did not lend their support to the mutineers. Were they merely selfish in wanting to protect and advance their own careers in independent India? Or were they mindful of the implications of such a mutiny for navy discipline after independence? Or is this yet another illustration of the difficulties of forging solidarity across class barriers?

**The mutiny lasted but a few days, and Pramod Kapoor keeps you on the edge with a detailed, almost hourly, account of how the events unfolded, though the tenseness of the moment is occasionally relieved with an ironical observation, a gripping anecdote, and a sprinkling of bon mots**

Nevertheless, it is comforting to think that, even if momentarily, Hindus and Muslims were able to overcome their differences and find common ground. At this present moment, Kapoor's book is a superb reminder not only of the importance of an event that has been occluded from the national imagination, and equally of a time when awareness of oppression trumped religious differences, but also of the possibilities of the transgressive force of truly revolutionary activity. ■

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# DREAM VERSE

## Avinab Datta-Areng's debut poetry collection confronts family, loss and death. **Aditya Mani Jha** speaks to the poet

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

ABOUT TWO-THIRDS into *Annus Horribilis*, Avinab Datta-Areng's debut poetry collection (Vintage; 88 pages; ₹250), there's a poem called 'Mise en Scène' that fires this stunning opening salvo: "By the time they had passed / the pile of burning bodies / at the station / their arguments had become / irreversibly benign. / Which is to say / they could no longer end or arouse them." There are two portraits of suffering in these lines: a public one, wherein there's a pile of burning bodies near a railway or bus station (evoking Partition-era violence, perhaps, or a similarly large-scale tragedy) and a private one, which is the impending demise of a couple's relationship; the beginning of the end. The poem only grows stronger and weirder from this point on, before ending with the line "(...) Please don't leave me / This is changing the world".

The irony of the narrator saying this couldn't be more bittersweet, since it is in fact the exact opposite of what is going

on—this couple has grown apart *because* the world is changing. Because sometimes, larger geopolitical events can have smaller, much more intimate consequences, a reverse butterfly effect if you will. *Annus Horribilis* is full of alchemic moments like this one that do not follow strict narrative logic (we do not know, for example, the immediate source of conflict at the heart of the poem) but the poems are irresistible all the same.

At a time when publishers typically turn away debut poets, *Annus Horribilis* is an exception as it showcases the solo work of Datta-Areng, who has been the recipient of the Charles Pick fellowship for fiction from the University of East Anglia and the Vijay Nambisan Fellowship for poetry.

During a telephonic interview with the 33-year-old Datta-Areng (who lives in Goa), the poet speaks about the process behind some of these poems. "Most of the poems in this collection were written close to a decade ago," he says. "'Mise en Scène', like some of the others here, is basically a transliteration, you could say, from my dreams. I just noted them down, no matter how baffling they sounded initially." But isn't 'dream logic' notorious for stitching together possibly unrelated strands from whatever you were thinking of before your REM cycle began? As it turns out, this can be a real narrative strength, as Datta-Areng explains during our conversation. "Perhaps it's because of my personal history or my family history, but I've always felt really immersed in the larger histories of the world. It's a kind of insecurity, you could say. There are these moments when I try and make those things coalesce, where I can't view myself in isolation, where I am inevitably connected to the world."

While Datta-Areng was at Bombay University, he and three other students (Divya Nadkarni, Ishita Bal and Rohan Chhetri) formed the literary journal *Nether*. With a little help from poets like Ranjit Hoskote, and pooling their own resources, the first issue, for example, featured a photograph by Datta-Areng's sister Jennifer on the cover. And although Chhetri and Bal later left, *Nether* is still spoken of fondly in poetry circles, due to its high-quality output and meaningful conversations around craft. During the first wave of the pandemic in 2020, Nadkarni and Datta-Areng revived the journal, albeit in a digital-only format. "To an extent, running a literary journal is a young person's game," recalls Datta-Areng. "When we started *Nether* we weren't thinking about the costs or the risks. But the rewarding part is, obviously, that you get to publish the kind of work you wished you saw more of in the mainstream—and the conversations you can have with fellow writers, free from the pressures of the bottom line."

He also contrasted the preponderance of literary journals in American academia, for example, with the analogous, much smaller space for literary journals in India. "In America, every university that has a creative writing programme also has a journal of their own," he says. "And those MFA programmes and these journals kind of prepare you for the specifics of a writer's life—getting professional feedback, the economic realities of publishing and so on. I think while this may not be to everybody's liking, it does benefit a lot of people."

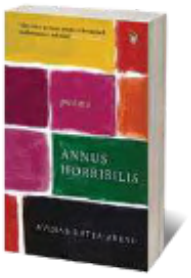
During one of the conversations published last year in *Nether* (titled, 'Have we cancelled our parents?'), Datta-Areng discussed his work-in-progress, a novel where the Indian protagonist begins to see the face of an authoritarian Indian prime minister superimposed upon his father's face. Through the course of the novel, the flaws of the two men begin to converge, starting the process of "coalescing" private and public histories that Datta-Areng previously referred to during our conversation.

This fixation with 'overcoming' the influence of a father figure is visible across *Annus Horribilis* as well. In a poem called 'Your Father's Shirt', the poet strings together a series of visceral images that interrogate the narrator's fears regarding his love life, locating it within that same unthinking faith that most of us have in our parents.

"I failed to see your longing for your father / as a footnote to me. How could any love / that drew from within the same source / as your love for him, its dedication, be untrue? / I was deceived by my destiny of fathers. / In my life's revolutions of fathers, my answer, / too, was disguised in a father, but the mind / meanders toward what it first sees. / First father, then fear, then flounder."

There's plenty of literary precedent for using the imagery of patricide or matricide as a kind of coming of age. The much-loved Irish writer Colm Tóibín has, in fact, written an entire book of essays on the topic—named, appropriately enough, *New Ways to Kill Your Mother: Writers and Their Families* (2012). "My understanding of this world and my emotional worldview, you could say, have always been plagued by my familial relationships, or lack thereof," says Datta-Areng. "This is a very crude metaphor, but it's almost like a Rorschach test, where everyone sees something different in the same inkblot

> "MY UNDERSTANDING OF THIS WORLD AND MY EMOTIONAL WORLDVIEW, YOU COULD SAY, HAVE ALWAYS BEEN PLAGUED BY MY FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIPS, OR LACK THEREOF"
>
> **AVINAB DATTA-ARENG** poet



pattern. My sense of affect has always been navigated through stuff like this, like my relationship with my father with whom I share an intense personal history. It has always found a way into my work. It's something I have been trying to navigate." To that extent, he calls his novel-in-progress "a failed novel", until he finishes this process of navigation, that is.

To confront family is also, inevitably, to confront loss and untimely death and there's plenty of that in *Annus Horribilis*.

> "I'M ALSO THINKING OF THE 'DISRUPTION' OF THE TRADITIONAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN READER AND WRITER. I WOULDN'T SAY THAT RELATIONSHIP IS BROKEN, BUT IT'S GOING IN ALL DIRECTIONS — IT'S JUST SO MUCH EASIER TO REACH PEOPLE NOW, IF YOU REALLY WANT TO. I DON'T EVEN NECESSARILY SEE IT AS A BAD THING"
>
> **AVINAB DATTA-ARENG**

A poem called 'Genealogy' begins with a 'seventh-son-of-a-seventh-son' kind of moment, where the narrator sees three generations of his family staring back at him through his grandfather's face, before the daunting business of grief (and therefore, coffins) creeps in.

"Dear grandfather, said / my grandfather / to his grandfather / as he stood staring / at the trunk / of the jackfruit tree / I had climbed yesterday / to yearn for you. / From up there the only / sign I could see / was a board that read / 'Coffins available'. / My brother and I had made / a joke years ago, as we drove / through town looking / for a bottle on a dry day. / We didn't buy one then but had / to buy one for him a year later. / My brother now in the coffin."

And yet, the poems here are neither optimistic nor strictly doomsday in their outlook. In a poem called 'To a Moth' the narrator wonders whether the fleeting life of a moth is worth the effort of preservation. Is a swift death always kinder than a drawn-out demise? Writers as diverse as Albert Camus, Nadine Gordimer and Dave Eggers have weighed in on this question previously. What's remarkable about *Annus Horribilis* is that despite the deadly serious matter at hand, 'To a Moth' is actually a funny poem. Note the way the deadpanned last line ("What's a little more life anyway?") uses its ambiguity (because this can be said before a life-saving or a life-ending intervention).

"The meanest thing I said / all week (to a moth trying / to perch on the screen-light): / I'm sick / of you but you'll be / dead by dawn anyway. / I placed you on top of a bunch / of golden everlastings in the garden, wings / still spread out. (I didn't know / you weren't dead yet.) / You jumped from the bract tower, buried / in pollen. A little movement. / I put you back. What's a little more life?"

RELAUNCHING A literary journal, releasing *Annus Horribilis* — it's been an eventful couple of years for Datta-Areng. In a way, these two ventures are in direct opposition to each other; the book representing traditional, brick-and-mortar publishing and the all-new digital-only *Nether* representing an alternative route for writers to reach discerning readers. How does he view all of the ongoing disruption in the interconnected worlds of writing, publishing and journalism — Substack, Patreon, the new models of monetising 'content'?

"I think the ways in which we process information have become so muddled," says Datta-Areng. "In a way, the 'disruption' that you speak of has been happening across the last decade or so. But also, when you say 'disruption', I'm also thinking of the 'disruption' of the traditional relationship between reader and writer. I wouldn't say that relationship is broken, but it's going in all directions — it's just so much easier to reach people now, if you really want to. I don't even necessarily see it as a bad thing; I just see it as the next step in the evolution, in the structures we use for our reading and writing."

Like a lot of debut works, *Annus Horribilis* is also, ultimately, interested in the nuts and bolts of writing itself. It does not romanticise or shun the uglier aspects of the craft. Instead, it bravely attempts to deconstruct everything intangible about the practice of writing. One of my favourite poems in the collection is called, quite simply, 'Writing'. Early into the poem, you have the deadpanned brilliance of the line, "You have a different voice today, said the voice to the voice". Spring-heeling off this one-liner, the poet goes further and further into the writer's heart and mind, noting the little provocations and obfuscations steadily, almost dispassionately. And then in its last movement, the poem soars, laying bare the paradox at the heart of writing: that almost every text worth your time is trying to describe something inherently easier to understand than to describe.

"In another room I am rising from bed with no desire / any more to put anything down, and with a tree's / wisdom of grief, whatever that means. / In what mode do I speak of / the rock lying there, now a different / bird coming to perch on it, / now the sense in me arriving that it's time? / At its core always a spinning / where it appears you're there but not."

*Annus Horribilis* may have taken a decade in the making but it's well worth the wait. Poetry lovers, in particular, would do well to keep track of Datta-Areng's career, because this collection feels like the beginning of something special. ■

# Power and Religion

## The complex evolution of cultures and societies in the Deccan

**By Ira Mukhoty**

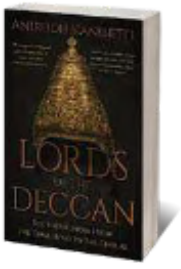
Kailashanatha temple at the Ellora Caves

GETTY IMAGES

DEBUT AUTHOR Anirudh Kanisetti has big ambitions. He wants to entice young Indians to read about a relatively obscure swathe of Deccani history and he needs to do so, moreover, as his editor has warned him, while competing against these young Indians' primary source of entertainment—Netflix. Luckily for readers, young and old, Kanisetti has taken on the task with extraordinary confidence, panache and flair.

*Lords of the Deccan* covers the area of darkness between the end of the Gupta Empire and the rise of the Delhi Sultanate, two "imperial moments," which Kanisetti believes unfairly capture the public imagination in India. Instead, the author takes us to the Deccan between the 6th and the 12th centuries CE, and shines a searing and entrancing light on the Chalukya, Rashtrakuta and Chola dynasties. These 500 years begin in the Deccan in smoke and fire, with a group of somewhat ill-kempt agriculturists performing the great *Ashvamedha Yagna* to claim for themselves a more exalted lineage, thus using Vedic symbology to shore up their admittedly tenuous grasp on rulership. As the book spins through the centuries, however, Vedic sacrifices, expensive and too ephemeral to be of practical use to would-be-kings, are abandoned in favour of temple building and idol carving and slowly the dreams of Kailashanatha temple at Ellora are conjured up. From the scrappy, hard-scrabble lives of the early agriculturists we see how complex cultures and societies evolve, powered by trade and geopolitical links in distant shores, with borrowed gods and imposter titles and seductive poets.

*Lords of the Deccan* is a world away from the drab texts of our childhoods, or indeed many current scholarly tomes. One of Kanisetti's great skills is to tease out the details that bring to life a long dead king or a disappeared place. So, when writing about the Malwan monarch Vakpati's sobering end at the hands of the Chalukyas, Kanisetti writes that "his once-glorious moustache torn and yanked, his fair skin probably splattered with mud and excrement," Vakpati is dragged to the public square and beheaded, and the reader will not so soon forget this once-obscure monarch. In writing about the creation of the great temples at Ellora, Kanisetti reminds us that there were builders, chisellers, blacksmiths, ironsmiths and more, and that they were legion and they are forgotten while the great patrons are celebrated. And so Kanisetti evocatively creates a world peopled with beings not so very dissimilar from us, with their pedestrian worries and tender loves. Their shadowy presence flickers for an instance in our imagination, and they are our true ancestors.




**LORDS OF THE DECCAN**
**SOUTHERN INDIA FROM THE CHALUKYAS TO THE CHOLAS**
Anirudh Kanisetti

Juggernaut
480 Pages | ₹699

This early medieval world, however, is a violent place in which no one is spared—not the gallant war elephants nor the high-born princesses. Kanisetti does not baulk at uncomfortable truths, and describes the destruction of temples and the mass rape of Brahmin women by a Chola king, in one instance. Indeed, the capture of women in war raids is dismayingly common and "it is rare," writes Kanisetti, "to find a medieval king claiming to respect women as people." This awareness of the need to tabulate the women, even when it is to record their absence, is altogether too rare in history writing. Power and religion, explains Kanisetti, go hand in hand and despite a recent desire for simple binaries, this ancient world defies all such facile categorisation. Kanisetti expertly decodes the symbology of architecture, of poetry, of titles, of rituals and language, to show us a world in all its complex beauty, ambition and violence.

The procession of endlessly warring monarchs and their unsatiated greed can become a bit bewildering for the unfamiliar reader sometimes. It would also have been wonderful to have had a few colour plates to complement the vivid descriptions. But these are faint mutterings. In prose that is lucid, witty and entertaining Kanisetti has created a mesmerising world, every bit as seductive as any Netflix offering. ■

# STARGAZER

KAVEREE BAMZAI

## Ray of Light

The happy family is at the dining table. The crabby cook is serving dinner. The father, played by Rahul Bose in a nightsuit, puts his phone down, his work done, and instructs the wife (Suchitra Pillai) and son to do the same. Now begins the inquisition. Are you alright, asks the mother. Yes, says the son (Vihaan Samat from *Mismatched*, 2020, and *Bombay Begums*, 2021). Do you want to tell us something? No, he says. Are you gay? No, he says again, spluttering. Hmm, so where do you see yourself five years from now, asks the mother. Dead?

A typical night in a typical suburban home. Only it's not so typically seen in a Hindi movie populated with alpha males and alpha females. So, say hello to Ray in the new Netflix series *Eternally Confused and Eager to Love*. Think of him as a prequel to the slacker Kabir of Zoya Akhtar's *Dil Dhadakne Do* (2015) or a younger version of Seinfeld, accessorised with a nosey work colleague, an old classmate from school eager to set him up with her girlfriends, and the squabbling parents he lives with. In short, meet the Bandra boy, seldom seen on screen, but often encountered in real life. Ordinary looking, odd sense of humour, sweet but with the ability to say and do the wrong thing, stemming from social anxiety and a deep insecurity.

Produced by Farhan Akhtar and Ritesh Sidhwani's Excel Entertainment and Zoya Akhtar and Reema Kagti's Tiger Baby Films, essentially the most powerful siblings in Bollywood, *Eternally Confused and Eager to Love* is a series that has been a long time coming. We've had enough of the confident hero, the stalker hero, the man-child. It was time for us to see a young man on screen as we often encounter him in life. Ray has a special friend, too, a voice in his head that belongs to his imaginary wizard/friend who keeps popping up, as a key chain, a bobblehead in the car, a sketch in his office, a cartoon in his bathroom and a figurine on his shelf. Part Gandalf, part Merlin, he looks like a wise old man, but doesn't behave like one, constantly putting our hero in the path of danger. Sample of their telepathic dialogue: There are plenty of fish in the sea, says Ray after he doesn't get a match on his dating app. Except, you're afraid of the water, says the wizard.

The series is written and directed by Rahul Nair who, like his lead, Samat, went to New York University. All of 29, Nair has worked in various capacities, from production assistant to assistant director on Excel and Tiger Baby movies and shows such as *Rock On 2* (2016) and *Made in Heaven* (2019). This is his first independent work and it is light, refreshing and delightfully binge-worthy. Nair is the son of veteran television executive Sameer Nair who runs Applause Entertainment, and while Ray's screen parents are not exactly based on his father and stepmother, he did get their sign-off on the dialogues. My favourite? "Be your own diaper," says his dad, giving him dating advice, "don't say anything."

## The Wicked Wizard

If there is one man who is having a moment in Bollywood, and about time, too, it is Jim Sarbh. He played Homi Bhabha with great aplomb in Sony Liv's *Rocket Boys* (2022), was the handsome journalist who helped Gangubai get her story across in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, and is now cast as the wicked wizard's voice in *Eternally Confused and Eager to Love*. It is a star turn, infusing wit and style into the eccentricity required of him. Dubbed over 12 days of intense work, the result is an audio track that tops Pluto the dog in *Dil Dhadakne Do*, voiced by Aamir Khan.

## Scene That

If Dalai, Ray's classmate in *Eternally Confused and Eager to Love*, looks familiar, well it's not only from her part in the second episode of *Made in Heaven*. In 2007, Dalai Mulchandani (her father Ranjeev was famous for being a model who dated Aishwarya Rai and Manisha Koirala back in the day) played Madhuri Dixit's daughter in *Aaja Nachle* (2007). She was the cute teenage NRI daughter who empathised with her mother as she returned to her rickety old town to save her guru's troupe from being disbanded. Dalai was Zoya Akhtar's assistant in *Made in Heaven* and also played Harsimran Mann, the Dubai princess, shortly to be wed to Delhi's prince, who ends up sleeping with the star who is paid to appear at their wedding. ■

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